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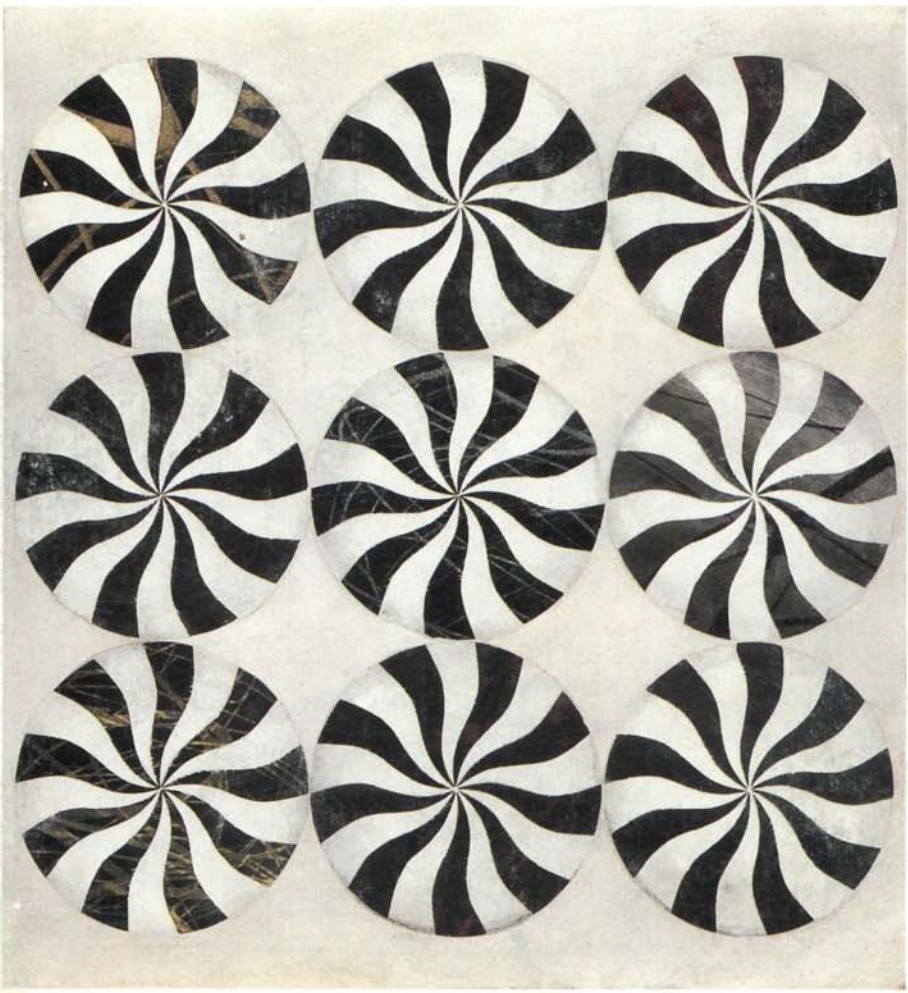

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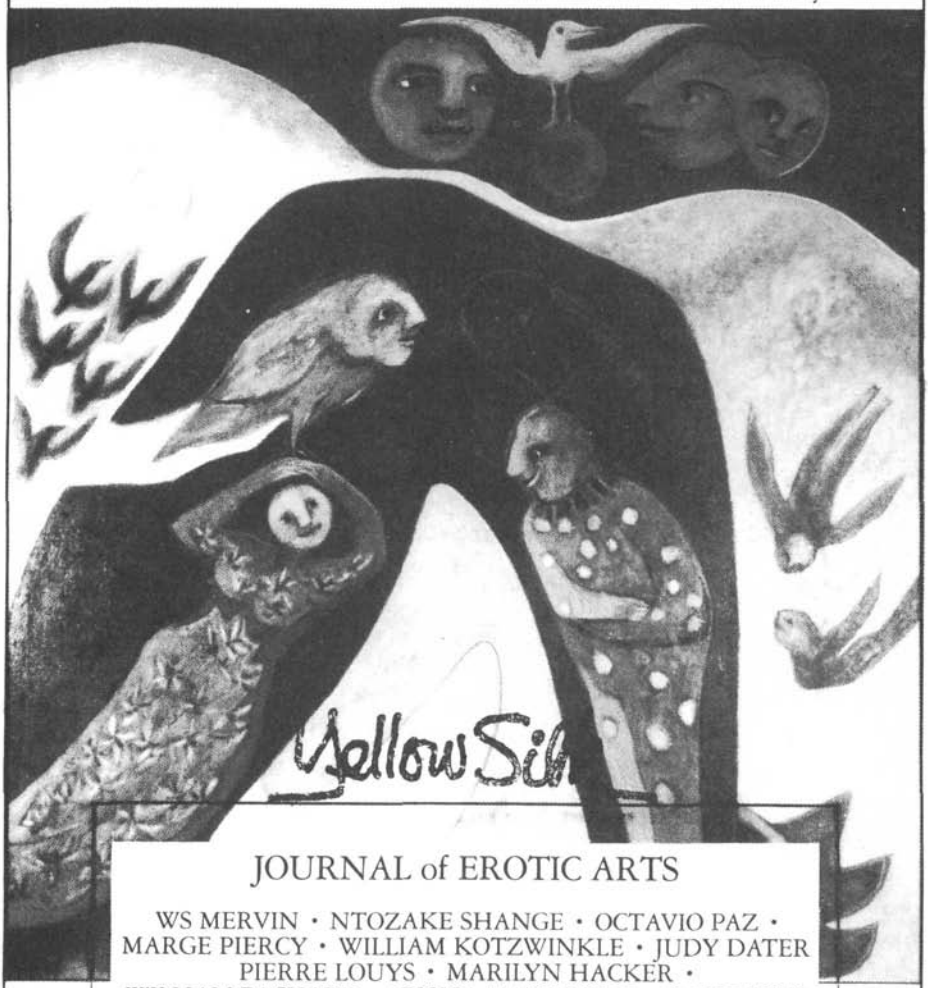

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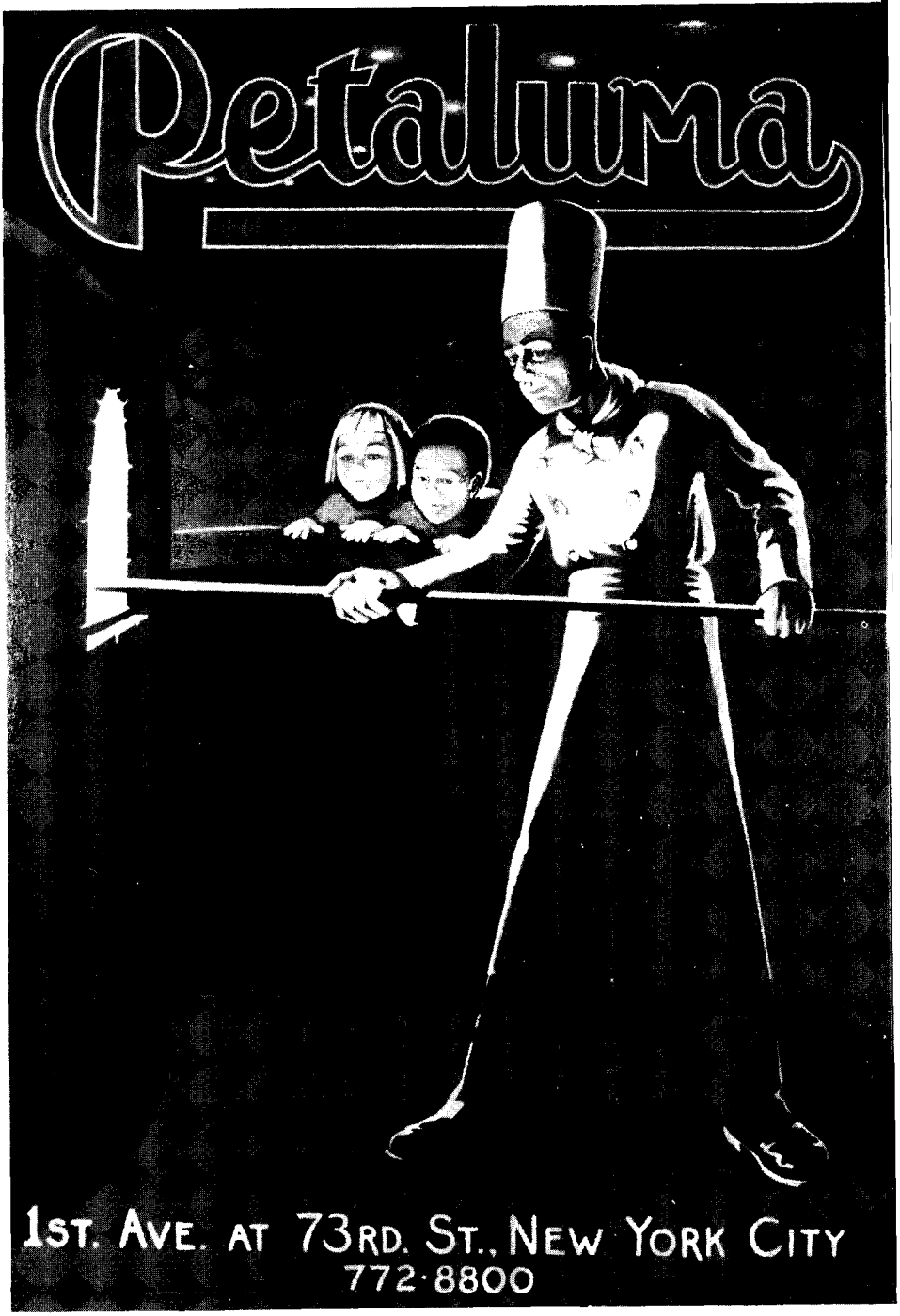

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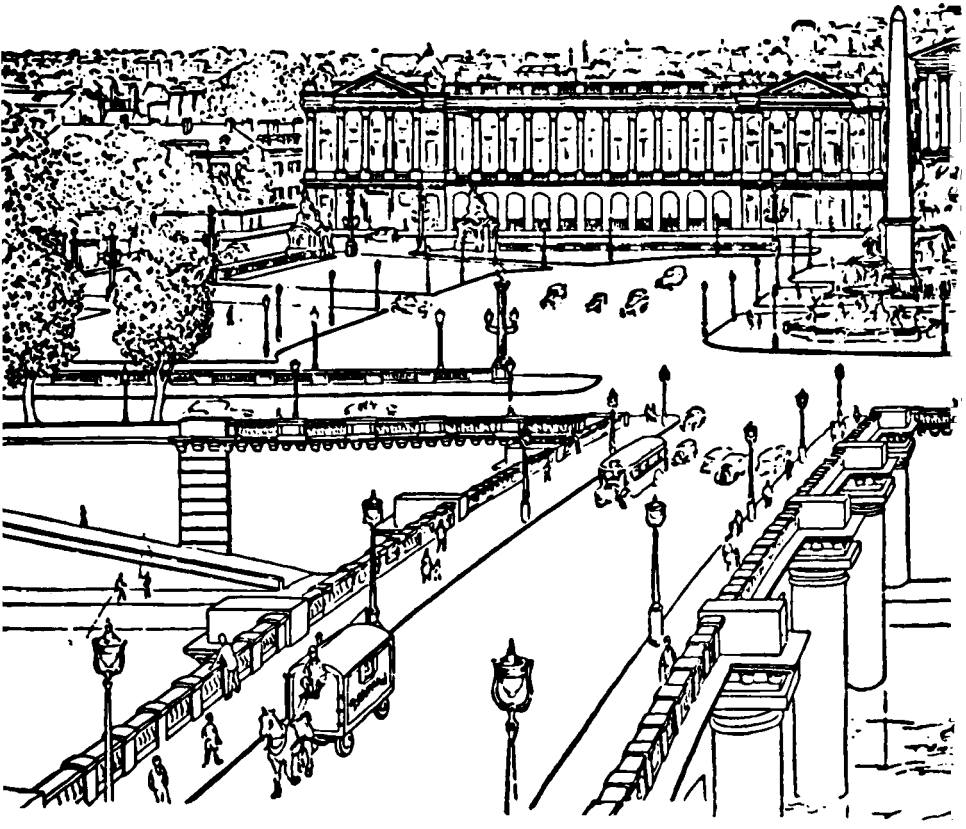

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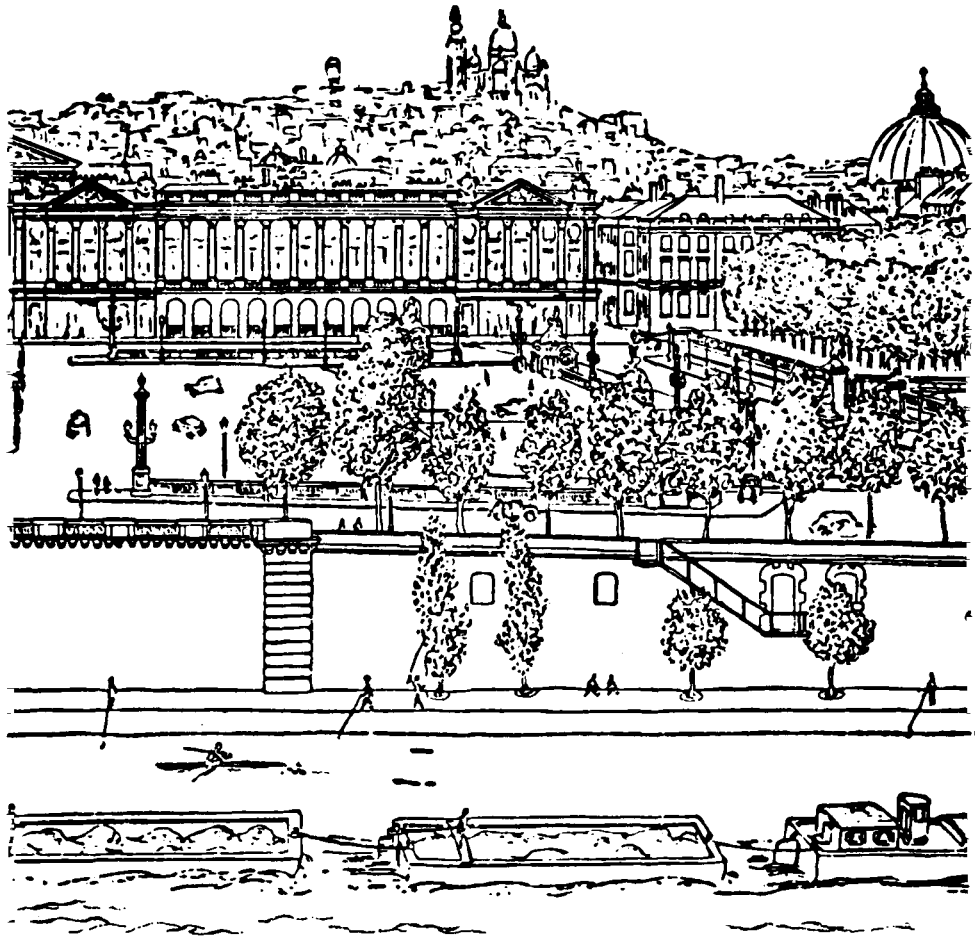

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Westland

Charles Baxter

Saturday morning at the zoo, facing the lions' cage, overcast sky and a light breeze carrying the smell of peanuts and animal dung, the peacocks making their stilted progress across the sidewalks. I was standing in front of the gorge separating the human viewers from the lions. The lions weren't caged, exactly; they just weren't free to go. One male and one female were slumbering on fake rock ledges. Raw meat was nearby. My hands were in my pockets and I was waiting for a moment of energy so I could leave and do my Saturday morning errands. Then this girl, this teenager, appeared from behind me, hands in *her* pockets, and she stopped a few feet away on my right. In an up-all-night voice, she said, "What would you do if I shot that lion?" She nodded her head: she meant the male, the closer one.

"Shot it?"

"That's right."

"I don't know." Sometimes you have to humor people, pretend as if they're talking about something real. "Do you have a gun?"

"Of course I have a gun." She wore a protective blankness

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on her thin face. She was fixed on the lion. "I have it here in my pocket."

"I'd report you," I said. "I'd try to stop you. There are guards here. People don't shoot caged animals. You shouldn't even carry a concealed weapon, a girl your age."

"This is Detroit," she explained.

"I know it is," I said. "But people don't shoot caged lions in Detroit or anywhere else."

"It wouldn't be that bad," she said, nodding at the lions again. "You can tell from their faces how much they want to check out."

I said I didn't think so.

She turned to look at me. Her skin was so pale it seemed bleached, and she was wearing a vaudeville-length overcoat and a pair of hightop tennis shoes and jeans with slits at the knees. She looked like a fifteen-year-old bag lady. "It's because you're a disconnected person that you can't see it," she said. She shivered and reached into her pocket and pulled out a crumpled pack of cigarettes. "Lions are so human. Things get to them. They experience everything more than we do. They're romantic." She glanced at her crushed pack of cigarettes, and in a shivering motion she tossed it into the gorge. She swayed back and forth. "They want to kill and feast and feel," she said.

I looked at this girl's bleached skin, that candy bar and cola complexion, and I said, "Are you all right?"

"I slept here last night," she said. She pointed vaguely behind her. "I was sleeping over there. Under those trees. Near the polar bears."

"Why'd you do that?"

"I wasn't alone *all* night." She was answering a question I hadn't asked. "This guy, he came in with me for awhile to be nice and amorous but he couldn't see the point in staying. He split around midnight. He said it was righteous coming in here and being solid with the animal world, but he said you had to know when to stop. I told him I wouldn't defend him to his friends if he left, and he left, so as far as I'm concerned, he is over, he is zippo."

She was really shivering now, and she was huddling inside

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that long overcoat. I don't like to help strangers, but she needed help. "Are you hungry?" I asked. "You want a hamburger?"

"I'll eat it," she said, "but only if you buy it."

I took her to a fast-food restaurant and sat her down and brought her one of their famous giant cheeseburgers. She held it in her hands familiarly as she watched the cars passing on Woodward Avenue. I let my gaze follow hers, and when I looked back, half the cheeseburger was gone. She wasn't even chewing. She didn't look at the food. She ate like a soldier in a foxhole. What was left of her food she gripped in her skinny fingers decorated with flaking pink nail polish. She was pretty in a raw and sloppy way.

"You're looking at me."

"Yes, I am," I admitted.

"How come?"

"A person can look," I said.

"Maybe." Now she looked back. "Are you one of those creeps?"

"Which kind?"

"The kind of old man creep who picks up girls and drives them places, and, like, terrorizes them for days and then dumps them into fields."

"No," I said. "I'm not like that. And I'm not that old."

"Maybe it's the accent," she said. "You don't sound American."

"I was born in England," I told her, "but I've been in this country for thirty years. I'm an American citizen."

"You've got to be born in this country to sound American," she said, sucking at her chocolate shake through her straw. She was still gazing at the traffic. Looking at traffic seemed to restore her peace of mind. "I guess you're okay," she said distantly, "and I'm not worried anyhow, because, like I told you, I've got a gun."

"Oh yeah," I said.

"You're not a real American because you don't *believe*!" Then this child fumbled in her coat pocket and clunked down

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a small shiny handgun on the table, next to the plastic containers and the french fries. "So there," she said.

"Put it back," I told her. "Jesus, I hope the safety's on."

"I think so." She wiped her hand on a napkin and dropped the thing back into her pocket. "So tell me your name, Mr. Samaritan."

"Warren," I said. "My name's Warren. What's yours?"

"I'm Jaynee. What do you do, Warren? You must do something. You look like someone who does something."

I explained to her about governmental funding for social work and therapy, but her eyes glazed and she cut me off.

"Oh yeah," she said, chewing her french fries with her mouth open so that you could see inside if you wanted to. "One of those professional friends. I've seen people like you."

I drove her home. She admired the tape machine in the car and the carpeting on the floor. She gave me directions on how to get to her house in Westland, one of the suburbs. Detroit has four shopping centers at its cardinal points: Westland, Eastland, Southland, and Northland. A town grew up around Westland, a blue collar area, and now Westland is the name of both the shopping center and the town.

She took me down fast food alley and then through a series of right and left ninety-degree turns on streets with bungalows covered by aluminum siding. Few trees, not much green except the lawns, and the half-sun dropped onto those perpendicular lines with nothing to stop it or get in its way. The girl, Jaynee, picked at her knees and nodded, as if any one of the houses would do. The houses all looked exposed to me, with a straight shot at the elements out there on that flat grid.

I was going to drop her off at what she said was her driveway, but there was an old chrome-loaded Pontiac in the way, one of those vintage 1950s cars, its front end up on a hoist and some man working on his back on a rolling dolly underneath it. "That's him," the girl said. "You want to meet him?"

I parked the car and got out. The man pulled himself away from underneath the car and looked over at us. He stood up, wiping his hands on a rag, and scowled at his daughter. He wasn't going to look at me right away. I think he was checking Jaynee for signs of damage.

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"What's this?" he asked. "What's this about, Jaynee?"

"This is about nothing," she said. "I spent the night in the zoo and this person found me and brought me home."

"At the zoo. Jesus Christ. At the zoo. Is that what happened?" He was asking me.

"That's where I saw her," I told him. "She looked pretty cold."

He dropped a screwdriver I hadn't noticed he was holding. He was standing there in his driveway next to the Pontiac, looking at his daughter and me and then at the sky. I'd had those moments, too, when nothing made any sense and I didn't know where my responsibilities lay. "Go inside," he told his daughter. "Take a shower. I'm not talking to you here on the driveway. I know that."

We both watched her go into the house. She looked like an overcoat with legs. I felt ashamed of myself for thinking of her that way, but there are some ideas you can't prevent.

We were both watching her, and the man said, "You can't go to the public library and find out how to raise a girl like that." He said something else, but an airplane passed so low above us that I couldn't hear him. We were about three miles from the airport. He ended his speech by saying, "I don't know who's right."

"I don't either."

"Earl Lampson." He held out his hand. I shook it and took away a feel of bone and grease and flesh. I could see a fading tattoo on his forearm of a rose run through with a sword.

"Warren Banks," I said. "I guess I'll have to be going."

"Wait a minute, Warren. Let me do two things. First, let me thank you for bringing my daughter home. Unhurt." I nodded to show I understood. "Second. A question. You got any kids?"

"Two," I said. "Both boys."

"Then you know about it. You know what a child can do to you. I was awake last night. I didn't know what had happened to her. I didn't know if she had planned it. That was the worst. She makes plans. Jesus Christ. The zoo. The lions?"

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I nodded.

"She'll do anything. And it isn't an act with her." He looked up and down the street, as if he were waiting for something to appear, and I had the wild idea that I was going to see a float coming our way, with beauty queens on it, and little men dressed up in costumes.

I told him I had to leave. He shook his head.

"Stay a minute, Warren," he said. "Come into the backyard. I want to show you something."

He turned around and walked through the garage, past a pile of snow tires and two rusted-out bicycles. I followed him, thinking of my boys this morning at their scout meeting, and of my wife, out shopping or maybe home by now and wondering vaguely where I was. I was supposed to be getting groceries. Here I was in this garage. She would look at the clock, do something else, then look back at the clock.

"Now how about this?" Earl pointed an index finger toward a wooden construction that stood in the middle of his yard, running from one side to another: a play structure, with monkey bars and a swing set, a high perch like a ship's crow's nest, a set of tunnels to crawl through and climb on, and a little rope bridge between two towers. I had never seen anything like it, so much human effort expended on a backyard toy, this huge contraption.

I whistled. "It must have taken you years."

"Eighteen months," he said. "And she hasn't played on it since she was twelve." He shook his head. "I bought the wood and put it together piece by piece. She was only three years old when I did it, weekends when I wasn't doing overtime at Ford's. She was my assistant. She'd bring me nails. I told her to hold the hammer when I wasn't using it, and she'd stand there, real serious, just holding the hammer. Of course now she's too old for it. I have the biggest backyard toy in Michigan and a daughter who goes off to the zoo and spends the night there and that's her idea of a good time."

A light rain had started to fall. "What are you going to do with this thing?" I asked.

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"Take it apart, I guess." He glanced at the sky. "Warren, you want a beer?"

It was eleven o'clock in the morning. "Sure," I said.

We sat in silence on his cluttered back porch. We sipped our beers and watched the rain fall over things in our line of sight. Neither of us was saying much. It was better being there than being at home, and my morning gloom was on its way out. It wasn't lifting so much as converting into something else, as it does when you're in someone else's house. I didn't want to move as long as I felt that way.

I had been in the zoo that morning because I had been reading the newspaper again, and this time I had read about a uranium plant here in Michigan whose employees were spraying pastureland with a fertilizer recycled from radioactive wastes. They called it treated raffinate. The paper said that in addition to trace amounts of radium and radioactive thorium, this fertilizer spray had at least eighteen poisonous heavy metals in it, including molybdenum, arsenic, and lead. It had been sprayed out into the pastures and was going into the food supply. I was supposed to get up from the table and go out and get the groceries, but I had gone to the zoo instead to stare at the animals. This had been happening more often lately. I couldn't keep my mind on ordinary, daily things. I had come to believe that depression was the realism of the future, and phobias a sign of sanity. I was supposed to know better, but I didn't.

I had felt crazy and helpless, but there, on Earl Lampson's porch, I was feeling a little better. Calm strangers sometimes have that effect on you.

Jaynee came out just then. She'd been in the shower, and I could see why some kid might want to spend a night in the zoo with her. She was in a tee-shirt and jeans, and the hot water had perked her up. I stood and excused myself. I couldn't stand to see her just then, breaking my mood. Earl went to a standing position and shook my hand and said he appreciated what I had done for his daughter. I said it was nothing and started to leave when Earl, for no reason that I could

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see, suddenly said he'd be calling me during the week, if that was all right. I told him that I would be happy to hear from him.

Walking away from there, I decided, on the evidence so far, that Earl had a good heart and didn't know what to do with it, just as he didn't know what to do with that thing in his backyard. He just had it, and it was no use to him.

He called my office on Wednesday. I'd given him the number. There was something new in his voice, of someone wanting help. He repeated his daughter's line about how I was a professional friend, and I said, yes, sometimes that was what I was. He asked me if I ever worked with "bad kids"—that was his phrase—and I said that sometimes I did. Then he asked me if I'd help him take apart his daughter's play structure on the following Saturday. He said there'd be plenty of beer. I could see what he was after: a bit of free counseling, but since I hadn't prepared myself for his invitation, I didn't have a good defense ready. I looked around my office cubicle, and I saw myself in Earl's backyard, a screwdriver in one hand and a beer in the other. I said yes.

The day I came over, it was a fair morning, for Michigan. This state is like Holland, and nothing drains out of it, resulting in cold clammy mists mixed with freezing rain in autumn, and hard rains in the spring broken by tropical heat and tornadoes. It's attack weather. The sky covers you over with a metallic blue, watercolor wash over tin foil. But this day was all right. I worked out there with Earl, pulling the wood apart with our crowbars and screwdrivers, and we had an audience, Jaynee and Earl's new woman. That was how she was introduced to me: Jody. She's the new woman. She didn't seem to have more than about eight or nine years on Jaynee, and she was nearsighted. She had those thick corrective lenses. But she was pretty in the details, and when she looked at Earl, the lenses enlarged those eyes, so that the love was large and naked and obvious.

I was pulling down a support bar for the north end of the

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structure and observing from time to time the neighboring backyards. My boys had gone off to a scout meeting again, and my wife was busy, catching up on some office work. No one missed me. I was pulling at the wood, enjoying myself, talking to Earl and Jaynee and Jody about some of the techniques people in my profession use to resolve bad family quarrels; Jaynee and Jody were working at pulling down some of the wood, too. We already had two piles of scrap lumber.

I had heard a little of how Earl raised Jaynee. Her mother had taken off, the way they sometimes do, when Jaynee was three years old. He'd done the parental work. "You've been the dad, haven't you, Earl?" Jody said, bumping her hip at him. She sat down to watch a sparrow. Her hair was in a ponytail, one of those feminine brooms. "Earl doesn't know the first thing about being a woman, and he had to teach it all to Jaynee here." Jody pointed her cigarette at Jaynee. "Well, she learned it from somewhere. There's not much left she doesn't know."

"Where's the mystery?" Jaynee asked. She was pounding a hammer absentmindedly into a piece of wood lying flat on the ground. "It's easier being a woman than a girl. Men treat you better 'cause they want you."

Earl stopped turning his wrench. "Only if you don't go to the zoo anytime some punk asks you."

"That was once," she said.

Earl aimed himself at me. "I was strict with her. She knows about the laws I laid down. Fourteen laws. They're framed in her bedroom. Nobody in this country knows what it is to be decent anymore, but I'm trying. It sure to hell isn't easy."

Jody smiled at me. "Earl restrained himself until I came along." She laughed. Earl turned away, so I wouldn't see his face.

"I only spent the night in the zoo *once*," Jaynee repeated, as if no one had been listening. "And besides, I was protected."

"Protected," Earl repeated, staring at her.

"You know." Jaynee pointed her index finger at her father with her thumb in the air and the other fingers pulled back, and she made an explosive sound in her mouth.

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"You took that?" her father said. "You took that to the zoo?"

Jaynee shrugged. At this particular moment, Earl turned to me. "Warren, did you see it?"

I assumed he meant the gun. I looked over toward him from the bolt I was unscrewing, and I nodded. I was so involved in the work of this job that I didn't want my peaceful laboring disturbed.

"You shouldn't have said that," Jody said to Jaynee. Earl had disappeared inside the house. "You know your father well enough by now to know that." Jody stood up and walked to the yard's back fence. "Your father thinks that women and guns are a terrible combination."

"He always said I should watch out for myself," Jaynee said, her back to us. She pulled a cookie out of her pocket and began to eat it.

"Not with a gun," Jody said.

"He showed me how to use it," the daughter said loudly. "I'm not ignorant about firearms." She didn't seem especially interested in the way the conversation was going.

"That was just information," Jody said. "It wasn't for you to use." She was standing and waiting for Earl to reappear. I didn't do work like this, and I didn't hear conversations like this during the rest of the week, and so I was the only person still dismantling the play structure when Earl reappeared in the backyard with the revolver in his right hand. He had his shirt sleeve pulled back so anybody could see the tattoo of the rose run through with the sabre on his forearm. Because I didn't know what he was going to do with that gun, I thought I had just better continue to work.

"The ninth law in your bedroom," Earl announced, "says you use violence only in self-defense." He stepped to the fence, then held his arm straight up into the air and fired once. That sound, that shattering, made me drop my wrench. It hit the ground with a clank, three inches from my right foot. Through all the backyards of Westland I heard the blast echoing. The neighborhood dogs set up a barking chain; front and back doors slammed.

Earl was breathing hard and staring at his daughter. We

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were in a valley, I thought, of distinct silence. "That's all the bullets I own for that weapon," he said. He put the gun on the doorstep. Then he made his way over to where his daughter was sitting. There's a kind of walk, a little stiff, where you know every step has been thought about, every step is a decision. This was like that.

Jaynee was munching the last of her cookie. Her father grabbed her by the shoulders and began to shake her. It was like what you see in movies, someone waking up a sleepwalker. Back and forth, her head tossed. "Never never never never never," he said. I started to laugh, but it was too crazed and despairing to be funny. He stopped. I could see he wanted to make a parental speech: his face was tightening up, his flesh stiff, but he didn't know how to start it, the right choice for the first word, and his daughter pushed him away and ran into the house. In that run, something happened to me, and I knew I had to get out of there.

I glanced at Jody, the new woman. She stood with her hands in her blue jeans. She looked bored. She had lived here all her life. What had just happened was a disturbance in the morning's activities. Meanwhile, Earl had picked up a board and was tentatively beating the ground with it. He was staring at the revolver on the steps. "I got to take that gun and throw it into Ford Lake," he said. "First thing I do this afternoon."

"Have to go, Earl," I said. Everything about me was getting just a little bit out of control, and I thought I had better get home.

"You're going?" Earl said, trying to concentrate on me for a moment. "You're going now? You're sure you don't want another beer?"

I said I was sure. The new woman, Jody, went over to Earl and whispered something to him. I couldn't see why, right now, out loud, she couldn't say what she wanted to say. Christ, we were all adults, after all.

"She wants you to take that .22 and throw it," Earl said. He went over to the steps, picked up the gun, and returned to where I was standing. He dropped it into my hand. The barrel was warm, and the whole apparatus smelled of cordite.

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"Okay, Earl," I said. I held this heavy object in my hand, and I had the insane idea that my life was just beginning. "You have any particular preference about where I should dispose of it?"

He looked at me, his right eyebrow going up. This kind of diction he hadn't heard from me before. "Particular preference?" He laughed without smiling. "Last I heard," he said, "when you throw a gun out, it doesn't matter where it goes so long as it's gone."

"Gotcha," I said. I was going around to the front of the house. "Be in touch, right?"

Those two were back to themselves again, talking. They'd be interested in saying goodbye to me about two hours from now, when they would notice that I wasn't there.

In the story that would end here, I go out to Belle Isle in the city of Detroit and drop Earl's revolver off the Belle Isle Bridge at the exact moment when no one is looking. But this story has a way to go. That's not what I did. To start with, I drove around with that gun in my car, underneath the front seat, like half the other residents of this area. I drove to work and at the end of the day I drove home, a model bureaucrat, and each time I sat in the car and turned on the ignition, I felt better than I should have because that gun was on the floor. After about a week, the only problem I had was not that the gun was there but that it wasn't loaded. So I went to the ammo store—it's actually called the Michigan Rod and Gun Club—about two miles away from my house and bought some bullets for it. This was all very easy. In fact, the various details were getting easier and easier. I hadn't foreseen this. I've read Freud and Heinz Kohut and D. W. Winnicott, and I can talk to you about psychotic breaks and object-relations and fixation on oedipal grandiosity characterized by the admixture of strong object cathexes and the implicitly disguised presence of castration fears, and, by virtue of my being able to talk about those conditions, I have had some trouble getting into gear and moving when the occasion called for it. But now, with the magic wand under the front seat, I was getting ready for some kind of adventure.

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Around the house my character was improving rather than degenerating. Knowing my little secret, I was able to sit with Gary, my younger son, as he practiced the piano, and I complimented him on the Czerny passages he had mastered, and I helped him through the sections he hadn't learned. I was a fiery angel of patience. With Sam, my older boy, I worked on a model train layout. I cooked a few more dinners than I usually did: from honey-mustard chicken, I went on to varieties of stuffed fish and other dishes with sauces that I had only imagined. I was attentive to Ann. The nature of our intimacies improved. We were whispering to each other again. We hadn't whispered in years.

I was frontloading a little fantasy. After all, I had tried intelligence. Intelligence was not working, not with me, not with the world. So it was time to try the other thing.

My only interruption was that I was getting calls from Earl. He called the house. He had the impression that I understood the mind and could make his ideas feel better. I told him that nobody could make his ideas feel better, ideas either feel good or not, but he didn't believe me.

"Do you mind me calling like this?" he asked. It was just before dinner. I was in the study, and the news was on. I pushed the MUTE button on the remote control. While Earl talked, I watched the silent coverage of mayhem.

"No, I don't mind."

"I shouldn't do this, I know, 'cause you get paid to listen, being a professional friend. But I have to ask your advice."

"Don't call me a professional friend. Earl, what's your question?" The pictures in front of me showed a boy being shot in the streets of Beirut.

"Well, I went into Jaynee's room to clean up. You know how teenage girls are. Messy and everything."

"Yes." More Beirut carnage, then back to Tom Brokaw.

"And I found her diary. How was I to know she had a diary? She never told me."

"They often don't, Earl. Was it locked?"

"What?"

"Locked. Sometimes diaries have locks."

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"Well," Earl said, "this one didn't."

"Sounds as though you read it." Shots now on the TV of Ed Koch, the mayor, then shots of bag ladies in the streets of New York.

Earl was silent. I decided not to get ahead of him again. "I thought that maybe I shouldn't read it, but then I did."

"How much?"

"All of it," he said, "I read all of it."

I waited. He had called *me*. I hadn't called him. I watched the pictures of Gorbachev, then pictures of a girl whose face had been slashed by an ex-boyfriend. "It must be hard, reading your daughter's diary," I said. "And not *right*, if you see what I mean."

"Not the way you think." He took a deep breath. "I don't mind the talk about boys. She's growing up, and you can wish it won't happen, but it does. You know what I'm saying?"

"Yes, I do, Earl." A commercial now, for Toyotas.

"I don't even mind the sex, how she thinks about it. Hey, I was no priest myself when I was that age, and now the women, they want to have the freedom we had, so how am I going to stop it, and maybe why should I?"

"I see what you mean."

"She's very aggressive. *Very* aggressive. The things she does. You sort of wonder if you should believe it."

"Diaries are often fantasies. You probably shouldn't be reading your daughter's diary at all. It's *hers*, Earl. She's writing for herself, not for you."

"She writes about me, sometimes."

"You shouldn't read it, Earl."

Tom Brokaw again, and now pictures of a nuclear reactor, and shots of men in white outer space protective suits with lead shielding, cleaning up some new mess. I felt my anger rising, as usual.

"I can't help reading it," Earl said. "A person starts prying, he can't stop."

"You shouldn't be reading it."

"You haven't heard what I'm about to say," Earl told me. "It's why I'm calling you. It's what she says."

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"What's that?" I asked him.

"Not what I expected," he said. "She pities me."

"Well," I said. More shots of the nuclear reactor. I was getting an idea.

"Well is right." He took another breath. "First she says she loves me. That was shock number one. Then she says she feels sorry for me. That was shock number two. Because I work on the line at Ford's and I drink beer and I live in Westland. Where does she get off? That's what I'd like to know. She mentions the play structure. She feels *sorry* for me! My God, I always hated pity. I could never stand it. It weakens you. I never wanted anybody on earth pitying me, and now here's my punk daughter doing it."

"Earl, put that diary away."

"I hear you," he said. "By the way, what did you do with that gun?"

"Threw it off the Belle Isle Bridge," I said.

"Sure you did," he said. "Well, anyway, thanks for listening, Warren." Then he hung up. On the screen in front of me, Tom Brokaw was introducing the last news story of the evening.

Most landscapes, no matter where you are, manage to keep something wild about them, but the land in southern Michigan along the Ohio border has always looked to me as if it had lost its self-respect some time ago. This goes beyond being tamed. This land has been beaten up. The industrial brass knuckles have been applied to wipe out the trees, and the corporate blackjack has stunned the soil, and what grows there—the grasses and brush and scrub pine—grows tentatively. The plant life looks scared and defeated, but all the other earthly powers are busily at work.

Such were my thoughts as I drove down to the nuclear reactor in Holbein, Michigan, on a clear Saturday morning in August, my loaded gun under my seat. I was in a merry mood. Recently activated madcap joy brayed and sang inside my head. I was speeding. My car was trembling because the front end was improperly aligned and I was doing about seventy-five. One false move on the steering wheel and I'd be perma-

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nently combined with a telephone pole. I had an eye out for the constables but knew I would not be arrested. A magic shield surrounded my car, and I was so invincible that Martians could not have stopped me.

Although this was therapy rather than political action, I was taking it very seriously, especially at the moment when my car rose over the humble crest of a humiliated grassy hill, and I saw the infernal dome and cooling towers of the Holbein reactor a mile or so behind a clutch of hills and trees ahead and to my left. The power company had surrounded all this land with high cyclone fencing, crowned with barbed wire and that new kind of coiled lacerating razor wire they've invented. I slowed down to see the place better.

There wasn't much to see because they didn't want you to see anything; they'd built the reactor far back from the road, and in this one case they had let the trees grow (the usual demoralized silver maples and willows and jack pines) to hide the view. I drove past the main gate and noted that a sign outside the guards' office regretted that the company could not give tours because of the danger of sabotage. Right. I hadn't expected to get inside. A person doesn't always have to get inside.

About one mile down, the fence took a ninety-degree turn to the left, and a smaller county road angled off from the highway I was on. I turned. I followed this road another half mile until there was a break in the trees and I could get a clear view of the building. I didn't want a window. I wanted a wall. I was sweating like an amateur thief. The back of my shirt was stuck to the car seat, and the car was jerking because my foot was trembling with excited shock on the accelerator.

Through the thin trees, I saw the solid wall of the south building, whatever it held. There's a kind of architecture that makes you ashamed of human beings, and in my generic rage, my secret craziness that felt completely sensible, I took the gun and held my arm out of the window. It felt good to do that. I was John Wayne. I fired four times at that building, once for me, once for Ann, and once for each of my two boys. I don't know what I hit. I don't care. I probably hit that wall. It was

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the only kind of heroism I could imagine, the Don Quixote kind. But I hadn't fired the gun before and wasn't used to the recoil action, with the result that after the last shot, I lost control of the car, and it went off the road. In any other state my Chevy would have flipped, but this is southern Michigan, where there are shallow ditches and nothing drains away, and I was bumped around—in my excitement I had forgotten to wear my seatbelt—until the engine finally stalled in something that looked like a narrow offroad parking area.

I opened my door, but instead of standing up I fell out. With my head on the ground I opened my eyes, and there in the stones and pebbles in front of me was a shiny penny. I brought myself to a standing position, picked up the penny, a lucky penny, for my purposes, and surveyed the landscape where my car had stopped. I walked around to the other side of the car and saw a small pile of beer cans and a circle of ashes, where some revelers, sometime this summer, had enjoyed their little party of pleasure there in the darkness, close by the inaudible hum of the Holbein reactor. I dropped the penny in my trouser pocket, put the gun underneath the front seat again, and I started the car. After two tries I got it out, and before the constables came to check on the gunshots, I had made my escape.

I felt I had done something in the spirit of Westland. I sang, feeling very good and oddly patriotic. On the way back I found myself behind a car with a green bumpersticker.

CAUTION: THIS VEHICLE
EXPLODES UPON IMPACT!

That's me, I said to myself. I am that vehicle.

There was still the matter of the gun, and what to do with it. Fun is fun, but you have to know when the party's over. Halfway home, I pulled off the road into one of those rest stops, and I was going to discard the gun by leaving it on top of a picnic table or by dropping it into a trash can. What I actually did was to throw it into the high grass. Half an hour later, I walked into our suburban kitchen with a smile on my face. I explained the scratch on my cheek as the result of an accident while playing racquetball at the health club. Ann

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and the boys were delighted by my mood. That evening we went out to a park, and, sitting on a blanket, ate our picnic dinner until the darkness came on.

Many of the American stories I was assigned to read in college were about anger, a fact that would not have surprised my mother, who was British, from Brighton. "Warren," she used to say to me, "watch your tongue in front of these people." "These people" always meant "these Americans." Among them was my father, who had been born in Omaha and who had married her after the war. "Your father," my mother said, "has the temper of a savage." Although it is true that my mind has retained memories of household shouting, what I now find queer is that my mother thought that anger was peculiar to this country.

Earl called me a few more times, in irate puzzlement over his life. The last time was at the end of the summer, on Labor Day. Usually Ann and I and the boys go out on Labor Day to a Metropark and take the last long swim of the summer, but this particular day was cloudy, with a forecast for rain. Ann and I had decided to pitch a tent on the back lawn for the boys, and to grill some hot dogs and hamburgers. We were hoping that the weather would hold until evening. What we got was drizzle, off and on, so that you couldn't determine what kind of day it was. I resolved to go out and cook in the rain anyway. I often took the weather personally. I was standing there, grim faced and wet, firing up the coals, when Ann called me to the telephone.

It was Earl. He apologized for bringing me to the phone on Labor Day. I said it was okay, that I didn't mind, although I *did* mind, in fact. We waited. I thought he was going to tell me something new about his daughter, and I was straining for him not to say it.

"So," he said, "have you been watching?"

"Watching what? The weather? Yes, I've been watching that."

"No," he said, "not the sky. The Jerry Lewis telethon."

"Oh, the telethon," I said. "No, I don't watch it."

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"It's important, Warren. We need all the money we can get. We're behind this year. You know how it's for Jerry's kids."

"I know it, Earl." Years ago, when I was a bachelor, once or twice I sat inside drinking all weekend and watching the telethon and making drunken pledges of money. I didn't want to remember such entertainment now.

"If we're going to find a cure for this thing, we need for everybody to contribute. It's for the kids."

"Earl," I said, "they won't find a cure. It's a genetic disorder, some scrambling in the genetic code. They might be able to prevent it, but they won't *cure* it."

There was a long silence. "You weren't born in this country, were you?"

"No," I said.

"I didn't think so. You don't sound like it. I can tell you weren't born here. At heart you're still a foreigner. You have a no-can-do attitude. No offense. I'm not criticizing you for it. It's not your fault. You can't help it. I see that now."

"Okay, Earl."

Then his voice brightened up. "What the hell," he said. "Come out anyway. You know where Westland is? Oh, right, you've been here. You know where the shopping center's located?"

"Yes," I said.

"It's the clown races. We're raising money. Even if you don't believe in the cure, you can still come to the clown races. We're giving away balloons, too. Your kids will enjoy it. Bring 'em along. *They'll* love it. It's quite a show. It's all on TV."

"Earl," I said, "this isn't my idea of what a person should be doing on a holiday. I'd rather—"

"—I don't want to hear what you'd rather do. Just come out here and bring your money. All right?" He raised his voice after a quick pause. "Are you listening?"

"Yes, Earl," I said. "I'm listening."

Somehow I put out the charcoal fire and managed to convince my two boys and my wife that they should take a quick jaunt to Westland. I told them about Earl, the clown races, but what finally persuaded the boys was that I claimed there'd be

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a remote TV unit out there, and they might turn up with their faces on Channel 2. Besides, the rain was coming down a little harder, a cool rain, one of those end-of-summer drizzles that makes your skin feel the onset of autumn. When you feel like that, it helps to be in a crowd.

They had set up a series of highway detours around the shopping center, but we finally discovered how to get into the north parking lot. They'd produced the balloons, tents, and lights, but they hadn't produced much of a crowd. They had a local TV personality dressed in a LOVE NETWORK raincoat trying to get people to cheer. The idea was, you made a bet for your favorite clown and put your money in his fishbowl. If your clown won, you'd get a certificate for a free cola at a local restaurant. It wasn't much of a prize, I thought; maybe it *was* charity, but I felt that they could do better than that.

Earl was clown number three. We'd brought three umbrellas and were standing off to the side when he came up to us and introduced himself to my wife and the boys. He was wearing an orange wig and a clown nose, and he had painted his face white, the way clowns do, and he was wearing Bozo shoes, the size eighteens, but one of his sleeves was rolled up, and you could see the tattoo of that impaled rose. The white paint was running off his face a bit in the rain, streaking, but he didn't seem to mind. He shook hands with my children and Ann and me very formally. He had less natural ability as a clown than anyone else I've ever met. It would never occur to you to laugh at Earl dressed up in that suit. What you felt would be much more complicated. It was like watching a family member descend into a weakness like alcoholism. Earl caught the look on my face.

"What's the matter, Warren?" he asked. "You okay?"

I shrugged. He had his hand in a big clown glove and was shaking my hand.

"It's all for a good cause," he said, waving his other hand at the four lanes they had painted on the parking lot for the races. "We've made a lot of money already. It's all for the kids, kids who aren't as lucky as ours." He looked down at my boys. "You have to believe," he said.

"You sound like Jaynee," I told him. My wife was looking

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at Earl. I had tried to explain him to her, but I wasn't sure I had succeeded.

"Believe what?" she asked.

"You've been married to this guy for too long," he said, laughing his big clown laugh. "Maybe your kids can explain it to you, about what the world needs now." There was a whistle. Earl turned around. "Gotta go," he said. He flopped off in those big shoes.

"What's he talking about?" my wife asked.

They lined up the four clowns, including Earl, at the chalk, and those of us who were spectators stood under the tent and registered our bets while the LOVE NETWORK announcer from Channel 2 stood in front of the cameras and held up his starter's gun. I stared for a long time at that gun. Then I placed my bet on Earl.

The other three clowns were all fat, middle-aged guys, Shriners or Rotarians, and I thought Earl had a good chance. My gaze went from the gun down to the parking lot, where I saw Jaynee. She was standing in the rain and watching her old man. I heard the gun go off, but instead of watching Earl, I watched her.

Her hair was stuck to the sides of her head in that rain, and her cotton jacket was soaked through. She had her eyes fixed on her father. By God, she looked affectionate. If he wanted his daughter's love, he had it. I watched her clench her fists and start to jump up and down, cheering him on. After twenty seconds I could tell by the way she raised her fist in the air that Earl had clumped his way to victory. Then I saw the new woman, Jody, standing behind Jaynee, her big glasses smeared with rain, grinning.

I looked around the parking lot and thought: everyone here understands what's going on better than I do. But then I remembered that I had fired shots at a nuclear reactor. All the desperate remedies. And I remembered my mother's first sentence to me when we arrived in New York harbor when I was ten years old. She pointed down from the ship at the pier, at the crowds, and she said, "Warren, look at all those Americans." I felt then that if I looked at that crowd for too long,

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something inside my body would explode, not metaphorically but literally: it would blow a hole through my skin, through my chest cavity. And it came back to me in that shopping center parking lot, full of those LOVE NETWORK people, that feeling of pressure of American crowds and exuberance.

We collected our free cola certificates, and then I hustled my wife and kids back into the car. I'd had enough. We drove out of the Westland parking lot, then were directed by a detour sign into a service drive that circled the entire shopping center and re-entered the lot on the north side, back at the clown races. I saw Jaynee again, still in the rain, hugging her American dad, and Jody holding on to his elbow, looking up at him, pressing her thigh against him. I took another exit out of the lot but somehow made the same mistake I had made before, and, once again, found myself back in Westland. Every service drive seemed designed to bring us back to this same scene of father, daughter, and second wife. I gave them credit for who they were and what they were doing—I give them credit now—but I had to get out of there immediately. I don't know how I managed to get out of that place, but on the fourth try, I succeeded.

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Two Poems by Dennis O'Driscoll

Shandyesque

What is there
for my gloomy father
to get so worked up about,
white sheets
rumpled into a lather?

And why is my mother
yielding to his whim?
And why am I
(so phlegmatic ever after)
rushing breathlessly to win?

Could they not have turned over
or taken more care
or left me as I was,
basking in my element,
part of their gulped air?

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Mistaken Identity

Could I begin by asking what you were thinking of as the gunman approached?

Nothing very precise, actually. I was vaguely annoyed at pet owners. It's not fair to those who have to walk the streets. I'm nearly sure I had a flash of memory also—something had reminded me of the nest under the yew at my grandmother's. We found a clutch of warm fawn eggs one summer there. A girl, too, I think, a belt tied loosely round her waist?

Yes, that's right. She proved to be a key witness.

I've just recalled the way the hens would tap their legs like tuning forks, then hold their drawling notes long into the afternoon. My grandmother was always making something—knitting or crochet. Or baking. A blaze of peach flans and seed cakes and raspberry meringues.

What kind of fear did you have as the killer was about to strike?

I was a bit behind in my work. A few times in the last year or so a pain had flashed down my left thigh. Fear that anything would happen to the family, that Jim would go near the quarry again. That the new video would be robbed during our holiday.

Can you describe how you felt after you learned the news?

It was a kind of reverse dream. You know how when you dream of having done something with someone (or *to* someone, as it often is) you expect them to remember the experience too. I once cycled under the waves with the kids, viewing candy-striped fish from the saddle . . . This time, it is they who have all the details and I don't remember any of it—the shot, the

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emulsion of blood, the surgeon, the dizzy lowering into the clay, the statement about mistaken identity.

What would you like to have one more glimpse of?

The family, of course. My record rack. A girl in tennis dress. A sky aerated with stars. Swallows in summer that pedal uphill, then freewheel down. A blackbird on my front lawn charming worms. Sparks of moonlight kindling a tree. More ordinary things—the Sunday lunch just after it is served, the steaming gold of roast potatoes and chicken skin. The clothes folded after ironing. A running bath.

Any regrets?

That we are as similar in death as life, clustered here under the same headstones. But, to tell the truth, I never wanted to stand out. I would hate to have seen those newspaper reports with my name in them and the neighbours no doubt saying how quiet I was and the bishop praying for my soul and the police confirming I had no subversive connections.

Anything else you miss?

The smell of life given off by the earth that I have no nose for here. Those moments of nylon softness at bedtime nothing had prepared me to expect. The sports results.

Finally, do you forgive your killer?

I accept death as I accepted life—as something to get on with.

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Two Poems by Alice Fulton

Cusp

Sometimes when night turns me transparent
I want to lie on the dispassionate ground
and make of earth a gurney
till dawn lets me be opaque.

Knowing indifference is earth's
common constituent, I can take comfort
in a coldness innocent of aim,
expecting no finesse and no affection, sink
all clamor in the caulking
that's our planet, a little weather-
stripping against space,
and be glad for density,

which lets one substance hold its place
to the exclusion of another:
the pen stay separate from the hand,
the body independent of the earth,
the skin allow no ingress,
and jail and lighthouse
fail to occupy the same terrain.

So the wings big enough to lift us
are too big for us to move!

So the soul's not stashed inside the skull
like a daffodil springloaded in a bulb!

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Should I be grateful I escaped
pernicious heavens
when acceding to the empty
forms of affirmation might be better
than embracing disbelief?

Give me a minute while I think it through.

No cause for despair. Clinging to a planet
spinning twenty miles a second round the sun
with fourteen pounds of atmosphere
stuck to every mortal inch
and winds of ether streaming through
each cell, how could we not be well?

To the North, the Great Lakes are lit
by towers held to rocks with iron rods.
The glass hives in their heads
breed chips of glow to swarms
that slice night's infinite regress.
In winter, swags and valences of snow
turn the railings cosy as a curtained home.

By sight alone I'd never know
that ice is cold. How can I see
a cloud's less distant than a star
unless the cloud should intervene
between the star and me?

I recognize what's closest by its power
to obscure what's far.

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Some loveliness is porous as the hush
between notes that makes up music,
the waves of hue that strum the eye,
sensations that chime
through recessed nerves, leaving
the surface undisturbed
as air allows a beacon, flash-
light or light-
house to part the dark on either side.
But only our solid abundance lets us touch.

Electrons make way for a caress.

They want our bodies to be roomy
and float through each other, forgetting,
if forces ever knew or could forget,
that the particles in flesh are dense.
The more we press the more our substance
tries to dodge duress and finds it can't,
which comes across as touch.
How odd that the body's deep resistance
lets us feel another's presence,
and our presence is bestowed
by means of protest too.

That sensation is a failed escapement!

And touch won't prove congruency:
if certain nerves are spooked
we'll feel stroked though we're alone.
Still, no harm supposing
light massages prairies with appeasement
since it neither rips nor pushes them away,
that the swishing blank expanse
of snow comes down to dust ruffles

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and each knapsack of quanta
in the atom knows its role.

"I," the erogenous cusp
of mind and world, sees the rose
lining of a bird's beak
and calls the dawn a churchly blue.

But I need lessons in deportment.

How, at three a.m., to find the silo
by its denser cylinder on dark,
refract the husk until it grows
in deeper contrast to the night
and night becomes a positive
beside that lighthouse without light.

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Art Thou The Thing I Wanted

These unprepossessing sunsets
and aluminum-sided acres
retain us like problems
more interesting than solutions,
solutions being perfect

lots of condos, the groomed weather
of elsewhere. Well, we must love
what we're given, which is why
we get stuck
on the steel wool firmament

of home. Since it's the nearest
partition between us and what,
we choose to find it peerless.
And maybe why we wish
to lean our heads on the dense rocking

in a particular chest, as if the only
ocean lives there or a singular wind
swarms where the heart begins.
Sometimes a passing friend
becomes a mascot in our lives,

day in, day out. The thought of this anybody
affects us like a high
pollen count, inspiring a suffering
not unto death, but petty.
Having a crush is the expression.

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And we do feel pushed over, compressed
by chaperones we half-asked for.
Take me, take you. Say someone quips
"Your favorite so-and-so got drunk
and said to say hello," I accept it

as a secular blessing. I glow.
Glorious things of thee are spoken!
There should be a word for you
muses of unreason, like "vector"
since vectors have magnitude

and direction without a physical presence.
And the second meaning is "carrier
of infection." Don't we resent
the way our minds circle
unfavorable terrain for easement,

like jets above imagined runways?
Yet we like to be immersed, no sweat, in solutions
cooler than 98.6 degrees,
which explains the lure of fantasy.
"You never wanted," people say accusingly,

as if glut were gladness
rather than a bargain struck.
But what comes to live here—burrs
through clay, brown negligence—
comes to live without

certain fertile perqs. High tension
wires droop their rules
between harsh Eiffels in our yards.
Eyesores at first, they quickly become
backdrops whose presence nests

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in every residence unseen.
And when a line falls, the field sizzles
for a million inches without a sign
of flinch. Yesterday the elder
out back up and tumbled.

It wasn't hit by wind or lightning,
which made the sight of it—suddenly
half hanging on the barn
like a besotted lover on an arm—
more frightening. The trunk was hollow,

devoured by some tree disease.
In a few hours the limbed fluttering
looked normal on the lawn,
and its jagged profile fit
this make-do neighborhood of farms

run in the ground by agri-biz:
The three wilted pickups
in the yard, the tire of rusty geraniums
and sign that reads "Beware
of Dog," where there's no dog—

the tree looked right
at home among them, metaphorically
on its knees. Like others,
I mistake whatever is
for what is natural.

You know the commonplaces. How people think
women are good
at detail work when that's the only work

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they're given. Or how
the city's invisible

engines jiggled our coffee
till we believed quivering a constant
property of liquid.
Everything happens to me, I think,
as anything reminds me of you: the real estate

most local, most removed.
As on the remains of prairie
the curving earth becomes a plinth
from which we rise, towers
of blood and ignorance.

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Brooks Haxton

Compline

Having done compline by hand at the naked breast
with fingertip and ball of thumb, with tongue,

having with tonguetip traced from breastbone
down past pleat and groove of muscle

into the salt hair over the pubic mound,

having fit left foot and right hand,
Mount of Venus into the yearning arch,

after the kiss of the clavicle, after the earlobe
sucked with the eyetooth touching and in retreat,

after the backbone teased with eight nails
trailed in a single file till buttock

flexing in each palm, releasing, flex, release,
with rim of nostril flaring, cartilage of larynx vibrant,

cockshaft taken by strong-fingered hand, head
into fold unfolding pull enfolding down receptive lip

into the mouth of where it is to be

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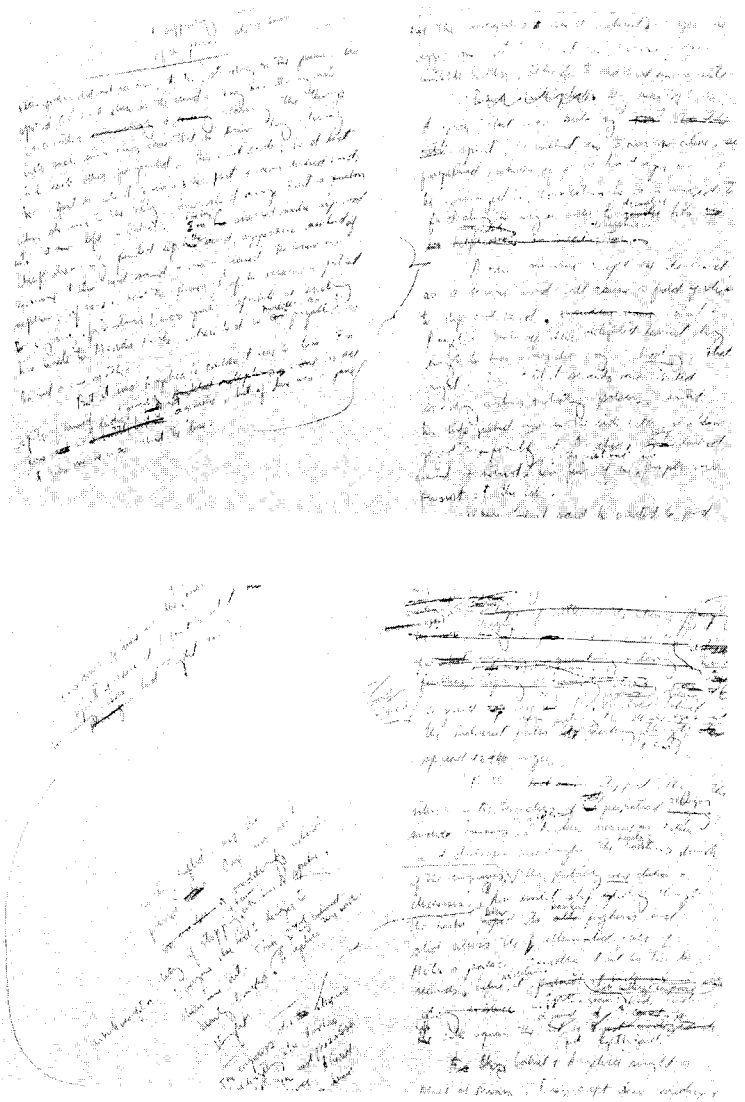

A selection of notebook pages from an early draft of Edmund White's novel Caracole.

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The Art of Fiction CV

Edmund White

I first met Edmund White following his move from New York to Paris in 1983. His novel A Boy's Own Story *(1982) had been recommended to me by Odile Hellier, in whose American bookshop, The Village Voice, White was scheduled to read. On the evening of the reading, the upstairs wing of Hellier's store was packed with curious newcomers. White's generous and genial personality, as well as his affective reading of his autobiographical novel—the first in a tetralogy dealing with gay experience in America—won White many new readers and inspired me to ask him to sit for an interview for the* International Herald Tribune *in April, 1984.*

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Over the next four years, White and I ran into each other often at various Paris gatherings, or at Village Voice literary evenings, and I meanwhile followed his essays and reviews in the New York Review of Books, The New York Times Book Review, *and American* Vogue, *where he is a contributing editor. White's previous novels,* Forgetting Elena *and* Nocturnes for the King of Naples, *and* States of Desire: Travels in Gay America, *had already identified him as a fresh, original voice in American fiction as well as one of the country's most eloquent representatives of the gay community, but it was with* A Boy's Own Story *that he acquired a wide international readership. French critics praised his Proustian sensibility and compared his prose to that of Henry James; in England the novel sold well over one hundred thousand copies and began White's regular contributions to the* Times Literary Supplement *and* The Sunday Times, *among others. His fourth novel,* Caracole, *was described by the British magazine* Time Out *as "something to revel in: elegant, fabulous, almost sublime." Earlier this year, White's second autobiographical novel in the tetralogy,* The Beautiful Room Is Empty, *appeared. At present, White is at work on a biography of Jean Genet.*

Our interview took place on a Sunday afternoon in mid-April, 1988. We met in White's apartment, a three-room walk-up in a seventeenth-century building that looks directly out onto the church of St.- Louis en L'Ile. Edmund White's persona is very much that of his nameless autobiographical narrator in A Boy's Own Story *and* The Beautiful Room is Empty—*a man who yearns for beauty and love, yet who often lives at the edge of the society he so painstakingly observes, his highest good is the truth of the imagination.*

INTERVIEWER

You've been variously congratulated by your peers as one of America's outstanding prose writers today, as a master of language and imagination. How does the kind of encouragement you need now differ from when you were just starting out?

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EDMUND WHITE

I feel I'm getting all the encouragement I need. I almost feel spoiled. I wish I were more disciplined and taking better advantage of the time I have now.

INTERVIEWER

Are literature grants such as the Guggenheim, which enabled you to settle and write in Paris, healthy for an author's sense of independence? Does the writer remain nonpartisan to the politics of the supporting institution?

WHITE

Oh yes, there are no strings attached. You don't have to do anything but write and you don't feel compromised in any way. And often one may have no idea what those politics are.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think there are enough grants available to writers who are just starting out?

WHITE

There ought to be more grants that go to people in their late twenties and early thirties. That's a crucial age, although it's very hard to judge who is worth supporting and who is not. Looking back on my own life, I see that was the period when I was closest to giving up as a novelist and when I most needed some encouragement. I didn't get anything published until I was thirty-three and yet I'd written five novels and six or seven plays. The plays, I should point out, were dreadful.

INTERVIEWER

How were you making a living?

WHITE

I was working for Time-Life Books from 1962 to 1970, as a

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staff writer, and after that I was a journalist. Eventually I became an editor at *The Saturday Review* and *Horizon.*

INTERVIEWER

These positions didn't allow you to think of yourself as a writer?

WHITE

No, because a journalist and novelist are not quite the same thing. I was writing all the time and I was considered a good journalist but I had no idea if I could write a novel. Part of my problem as a young writer was that I was too much a New Yorker, always second-guessing the "market." I became so discouraged that I decided to write something that would please me alone—that became my sole criterion. And that was when I wrote *Forgetting Elena*, the first novel I got published. In my courses later I always forbade my writing students to discuss in class the commercial side of publishing. I wanted to save them the time I'd lost; I wanted them to be serious, artistic, free of all constraints. I believe it was Schiller who said that the only time a human being is free is when he or she makes a work of art; if that's true, then art is sacred and shouldn't be compromised by mere ambition.

INTERVIEWER

You taught writing at Yale, Columbia and Johns Hopkins University. What do you, as a confirmed novelist, acquire from teaching experience?

WHITE

These are positions which are offered to you once you've already published a few books. I began teaching in 1977. In the beginning it served to clarify my thinking about my own methods. Then I used teaching to improve my work. For instance, I saw I was a weak plotter and so I would talk a lot in class about how to write strong plots, and how to analyze other peoples' novels and stories from that angle. That helped me to some degree; I was teaching myself. After a point, however,

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you become too immersed in other people's work to be able to think about your own, and it seems almost vulgar to write. You're surrounded by all of these struggling egos and it seems sort of impertinent. And yet being able to work out some of my own ideas about fiction was admittedly a useful process. I estimate there is a period of seven or eight years when you can do it, but then you burn out and I think you should stop for a few years before starting again.

INTERVIEWER

Would you elaborate?

WHITE

When I was teaching, some of my students were much better educated than I, and so I felt I really had to struggle to keep up with them and be worthy of their level of seriousness. I was also aware of just how much money they were spending in tuition and felt I had to give them their money's worth at every moment. I tended to over-prepare, or let's say to prepare very, very carefully, for which I think they were grateful. But it's true that at the same time I was pursuing my own interests. Certain writers interested me, for instance Proust, whom I'd read many times in my life though never with enough care. I taught a course in Proust, which was a way of making myself read him with great attention. In the same way, I taught a course in Pynchon. Though I had admired *Gravity's Rainbow*, I'd never been able to get through it. I think it is a great but boring book.

INTERVIEWER

In terms of lack of action?

WHITE

Of suspense.

INTERVIEWER

Is this inability to write fiction while teaching similar to the unwillingness to read novels while you're writing one?

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WHITE

Not in my case. I enjoy reading novels while I write. First, to steal ideas from other writers, particularly the classic ones—they remind you of just how good you have to be to be any good at all. It's very easy for one's standards to slip. I mean that I'm not an especially anguished writer; I tend to like what I write and am possibly satisfied too readily. When you finish reading a book like *Lolita* you feel that there's nothing more wonderful in the whole world than writing a novel; you feel challenged and awake and alive, and you have a desire to write with the same keen response to the sensuous world. Nadine Gordimer once said to me she felt that one of the things that goes out of writing as you become more mature is an attention to sensuous detail. I thought that was probably true but a terrible thing if it is true, and I've always tried to guard against what may be an inevitable process by reading some of my touchstone writers who never lost that love of sensuous detail, such as Colette, Nabokov and Knut Hamsun.

INTERVIEWER

There isn't a fear that a spark of originality might be taken away from you by reading earlier novels?

WHITE

No, no, I find, for instance, that when Cocteau wrote what I think is one of his best novels, *The Impostor*, he thought he was copying *The Charterhouse of Parma*; or when Raymond Radiguet wrote *Le Bal du Comte d'Orgel*, he thought he was copying *La Princesse de Clèves* by Comtesse de LaFayette—but you could read those two novels and never suspect their antecedents. There are many writers who enjoy seeing their books as a kind of *homage* to an earlier book. And yet very few readers would suspect such a link unless it was explicitly pointed out.

INTERVIEWER

There may also be some truth in the notion that a good novel should have the ingredients to spawn a hundred other

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good novels, so that a succeeding novelist ought to be able to seize upon the ideas of a predecessor and somehow further them in his own work.

WHITE

I think there is also this balance between the literary and the human interest in a book, if we can make that distinction. For instance, a novel like *Caracole* maybe errs in the direction of being too literary, without being sufficiently human. I think that *Lolita* is the greatest of all novels because it is both simultaneously. I mean that for those people who are interested in literature, it makes reference to a whole library of French poetry and fiction—everything from *Carmen* to Arthur Rimbaud. But for those who don't care about literature, they can read the book and be swept up by the strictly human interest of it, by the passions. I think that probably a novel like the one I've just finished, *The Beautiful Room Is Empty*, is very human in its orientation and may be the kind of book that pleases most readers—it holds a mirror to life; whereas *Caracole*, which is literary and fantastical and not obviously mimetic, has a much smaller readership.

INTERVIEWER

From reading the French reviews of your work, one learns that they consider you very much an author in the European tradition. To what do you attribute this?

WHITE

I believe they are struck by the echoes of Proust, in both *Nocturnes For the King of Naples* and *A Boy's Own Story*, and I think by that they mean a non-Freudian, psychological analysis written in a nuanced, flowing style. Americans don't necessarily associate that style with Proust; I think we usually attribute it to James, who is much more our figure.

INTERVIEWER

Would you say the European literary tradition differs from its American counterpart more in style and form rather than in content or concerns?

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WHITE

It very much depends on which period you're talking about. I think that the nineteenth century in America is extraordinarily different from the twentieth century. There may be certain preoccupations which are similar, such as the individual versus nature, or the dynamics of male companionship, or the loss of innocence—you could tack those as three concerns that unite the nineteenth with the twentieth century, but those are moral preoccupations. In terms of style, nothing could be more different than the prose of Emerson and, say, Richard Ford, or that of Raymond Carver and Hawthorne.

INTERVIEWER

Isn't this more a question of evolutionary progress in terms of writing technique?

WHITE

Yes, but style has evolved more rapidly in the States. I would say that there's more uniformity between the styles of Angelo Rinaldi and Proust or even Flaubert than there is between Carver and Hawthorne. Even though Europe witnessed a tremendous upheaval in experimental techniques in the twenties and thirties, namely with the surrealists (and with Joyce in English), that innovative moment has left a rather small effect, and now most French novelists, and English novelists, are writing rather like their nineteenth-century antecedents. Barbara Pym, for instance, writes like Jane Austen, and Jonathan Raban or Alan Hollinghurst like E.M. Forster—just to name some of the writers I admire. Obviously there are some changes; for instance there is a great deal more interiority in contemporary fiction than in nineteenth-century fiction, and a lot less incident, or plot. And there is far more sexuality now than then, and so on. But English novelists continue to be primarily concerned with analyzing character in terms of social class. American novelists are not at all interested in that.

INTERVIEWER

Aren't American novelists quite often less political in a worldly sense than Europeans?

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WHITE

Yes. I think a novelist like Milan Kundera, for instance, could not exist in America. A person of the stature of Kundera, let's say somebody like William Gass, doesn't have a political analysis of society so much as a mythic one. A novel like *Omensetter's Luck* by Gass, which I consider a masterpiece, is a big, mythic, Faulknerian, highly poetic view of an almost Jungian archetype, and this is an American tendency, one which starts with the greatest of all American novels, *Moby Dick*. It's a quasi-religious view of society, whereas in Europe, a novelist such as Kundera is extremely interested in questions of individual authenticity versus political "kitsch," as he would put it.

INTERVIEWER

Not to stray too far from the question of American and European literary counterpoints, it does seem somewhat odd that American novelists rarely work within a vast political framework, particularly when you evaluate U.S. interests and involvements abroad, which have of course escalated since 1945.

WHITE

I think you have to look at the social conditions under which writers live in the various countries. For instance, in France, writers have often been involved in politics as diplomats or ministers—Paul Claudel was the ambassador to Japan and André Malraux was de Gaulle's minister of culture. Carlos Fuentes and Octavio Paz were diplomats and García Márquez was a journalist who knew Castro as a friend. Alejo Carpentier was stationed for years in Paris. Most Russian or Middle European writers have *suffered* for their political views—they cannot afford to be indifferent to politics. Now, if you glance at the social situation of most American novelists, you'll see they are professors on small, isolated provincial campuses and the larger world of politics is not part of their experience. If you take someone like Raymond Carver, for instance, he is from a working-class family, he is a man who had a serious drinking problem. Now that he has stopped drinking and is writing very brilliantly, what he writes about is a different kind of so-

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cial problem; that is, the disenfranchisement of people in America itself. This is a perfectly legitimate concern and one which I think falls within his experience. I can't imagine him writing about the American oppression of people in Vietnam or Nicaragua; it's just not in his bailiwick. Of course there are American novelists who fought in Vietnam and who have written about that. I think the truth is that novelists are not universal legislators of morality, they don't set out to write about *the* most important issues; they write about the ones that have actually touched their lives. I agree with you, however, that there's something very insular about American fiction. So many books are first-person novels that deal with questions of adultery, personal poverty or misunderstanding between generations—suburban problems.

INTERVIEWER

There is a paradox at work here, I think, because America has become more and more dependent on the outside world. If you took the inkwell of U.S. interests and involvements and spilled it on a map of the world, you would see how it sinks in nearly everywhere. And yet it seems that so many Americans don't want to know that they are no longer protected from the larger scale of things.

WHITE

Americans do not keep up with world events. It may be partly that people don't travel very much, or it may be a kind of arrogance. Or maybe we should blame the press, which highlights personalities, not issues.

INTERVIEWER

Occasionally one finds foreign words and phrases in your novels, and sometimes the odd word coined by yourself. How do you decide when to employ foreign words or coin new ones and when to remain within "the riches" of the English language?

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WHITE

Actually, the odd thing is that since I moved to France I've probably used fewer foreign words in my fiction. While I was living in America I always had a kind of longing to live in Europe, which expressed itself in such linguistic borrowings. But now that I actually live here I'm so worried about my English becoming too Gallicized that I tend to eliminate French words. Although you think I've made up a lot of words, it's not quite true. I once knew a woman who read books for dictionaries, and she would circle unusual or substandard or odd, variant uses of words; she told me it had been a waste of her time to read my books because the usages were utterly conventional. I think that writers who invent new words, like Joyce, are admirable.

INTERVIEWER

In *The Beautiful Room is Empty*, however, you chose to use the words *malade imaginaire* in reference to a character, instead of hypochondriac.

WHITE

If you say "hypochondriac" it suggests a mild psychiatric problem that should be cured; if you say *malade imaginaire* it suggests a character in a Molière play—a comic figure whom experience will chide.

INTERVIEWER

Can you talk a bit about the writers who most helped to form you as a novelist?

WHITE

Vladimir Nabokov is my favorite writer, and I like Colette a great deal—I've learned a lot from the way she uses herself as a character in her own books and tantalizes the reader with the question: "Is this autobiography or is it fiction?" I also love her descriptions of nature and her handling of love. She is greatly underrated in France. I read Knut Hamsun all the time for inspiration, though he's so entirely different from me. Of

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course, I don't like his later work, when he came under the influence of fascism. But those early novels—*Mysteries, Victoria, Pan* and *Hunger*—are beautiful books. I'm drawn to the simple lyricism that runs through his writing. There is not much plot, but intense outbursts of feeling.

INTERVIEWER

And what is it about Nabokov that so moves you?

WHITE

It wouldn't be his intellectual high jinks, but his passion, his sensuous detail, the wonderful rendering of the physical, visual, material world around us. It's almost a spiritual way he has of describing the world; he makes it so glowing, so mouth-watering and so precise that you feel it has somehow been irradiated. Writers can use literature as a mirror held up to the world, or they can use writing as a consolation for life (in the sense that literature is preferable to reality). I prefer the second approach, although clearly there has to be a blend of both. If the writing is pure fantasy it doesn't connect to any of our real feelings. But if it's grim realism, that doesn't seem like much of a gift. I think literature should be a gift to the reader, and that gift is an idealization. I don't mean it should be a whitewashing of problems, but something ideally energetic. Ordinary life is *blah*, whereas literature at its best is bristling with energy. Somebody once said Balzac's only fault is that he makes all of his characters into geniuses, like himself. What a wonderful fault!

INTERVIEWER

Which of your American contemporaries do you admire?

WHITE

I like Robert Coover, John Hawkes, Richard Ford, Carver, Pynchon, Gass, William Gaddis, Robert Ferro and especially Cynthia Ozick. W.M. Spackman is someone I admire as well. James Merrill is, I think, my favorite living writer at the moment. I feel that his trilogy *The Changing Light at Sandover*

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is a masterpiece. I've been very involved with that book, following it as each episode appeared. His entire *oeuvre* seems to me enormously impressive and, again, imbued with the same kind of lyric quality that Nabokov has. Both of them constantly change register. They go from slang to the most serious or elevated speech, from the medieval language of courtly sentiment to the most recent street talk—a constant movement from the hieratic to the demotic, from the historic to the contemporary. This shift in register seems to be the genius of English, going back to Shakespeare, but it is not at all the genius of French, which is more concentrated and uniform in diction.

INTERVIEWER

Principally, what have you read in French since you moved to Paris?

WHITE

Chateaubriand's *Les Mémoires d'Outre Tombe*, Stendhal's *La Chartreuse de Parme* and, in more recent literature, Nathalie Sarraute's *Enfance*, which I admired tremendously. I think her style is ideally suited for early childhood memories because it is so spare and fragmentary. Most people writing about childhood tend to inflate what are actually very small memories into a continuous and rapturous narrative. She doesn't do that. Her refusal to part from the facts, the actual phenomenological memories of experience is careful and honest . . . I've been reading both Richard Ford and Raymond Carver, whom I admire immensely—Ford, I think, may be one of the most important new American fiction writers to emerge in the last five or six years. And of course, I've been reading a lot of Jean Genet for the biography I'm writing of him, and then other writers whom he read and liked, such as Racine and Jouhandeau. And I do quite a bit of book reviewing as well. So, I do read a good amount of fiction.

INTERVIEWER

Do you find yourself reading more slowly now than, say,

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twenty or thirty years ago, when you were just beginning to write? Are you reading from a craftsman's point of view, or are you still able to appreciate reading fiction as a kind of nostalgic literary enterprise?

WHITE

I get quite caught up in books, but rarely in French because I'm always too aware of reading another language. But I do often get caught up in English-language novels. I don't find that technical awareness stands in the way of pleasure; it can even make that pleasure more piercing if you're constantly excited by the writer's technique.

INTERVIEWER

In *A Boy's Own Story*, your nameless narrator "awakened to the idea that a great world existed in which things happened and people changed, took risks . . ." What kinds of risks do you feel you take as a writer?

WHITE

Writers are always taking risks economically. You don't have a retirement plan, you don't have health insurance necessarily, and little in the way of personal savings. In other words, if you were to become ill tomorrow or if you were to write two or three bad or unpopular books, you'd be very, very poor. Nevertheless I have always made it a point of honor to write as though I had a million dollars; that is, I try to write in the most original way I know how, and that feels like a risk each time you do it. André Gide said that with each book you write you should lose the admirers you gained with the previous one.

INTERVIEWER

One takes the risk of changing audiences, or styles?

WHITE

Yes, I think so. In the nineteenth century people wrote rapidly and they wrote a great deal; books were almost like chap-

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ters in people's writing today. Then there wasn't any question of changing the basic style, or basic premises. In the twentieth century the serious writer strives to evolve. Someone once said that each good novel should also advance a theory of the novel.

INTERVIEWER

There seem to be two distinct voices in your fiction, with *Nocturnes* and *Forgetting Elena* falling into a kind of baroque, rather dreamlike reality, while *A Boy's Own Story* and *The Beautiful Room Is Empty* are in that register of possible autobiography you admire in the novels of Nabokov and Colette. (*Caracole*, however, is somewhere between them and in a genre of its own.) How many convincing voices or styles can a novelist hope to master, and might they reflect the nature of his or her worldly concerns?

WHITE

Caracole was consciously about society and the individual's place within it. In *The Beautiful Room* I was interested in showing the puritanical oppression of sexual freedom. In any event, those two books have a specific political concern. If a writer keeps changing his style, he could be accused of dilettantism—or he could be defended as someone who resists the sort of packaging designed for quick product recognition and smooth consumption. Is a stylistically unpredictable writer a luxury product—or is he refusing to be a product? More subjectively, my mercurial literary personality reflects a general feeling of unreality. Like the narrator in *Forgetting Elena*, I'm an amnesiac—a guilty, not an innocent amnesiac. I keep feeling I've accomplished nothing, never written a "real" novel. Today, when so many of my friends are dead or dying of AIDS, that feeling of unreality has been heightened. People say we should seize the day, but just *one* day turns out to be too cold (or slippery) to hold.

INTERVIEWER

Until *Caracole* you wrote principally of gay experience. Why did you make the departure into "straight" fiction?

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WHITE

The writing of *Caracole* coincided with my coming to Europe. In New York, without even really noticing it, I had come to live an almost exclusively gay life (except for my teaching). I had gay friends, I dealt with gay shopkeepers, I lived in a gay community in Greenwich Village, and I was interested mainly in gay politics and read a lot of gay literature. My reference group, as a sociologist would say, was gay. But, when I came to Europe, partly because there isn't such a strong gay ghetto in Paris, I began to lead a more ordinary life. *Caracole* represents that renewed participation in society. I suppose that the idea for the novel came from reading, many years ago, eighteenth-century French pornographic fiction—the novels of Crébillon *fils*—which struck me as very odd. The heterosexual characters seemed so gay in that they were interested only in promiscuity and conquest. War was constantly a metaphor for love, and there was a highly structured and artificial nature to courtship. Sex was seen as sport, timekiller, self-expression, pleasure and war—whereas in nineteenth-century conventional heterosexual fiction it's seen as an urge toward companionship, affection, familial values or lust. Crébillon showed me how one could write about heterosexual sex in a very different way.

INTERVIEWER

Did you receive any reaction from heterosexual readers either confirming or disavowing some of the experiences they read about?

WHITE

A number of heterosexual men told me they found it arousing. An English novelist said that he'd gotten very embarrassed reading *Caracole* in a train. A reviewer from *L'Express* was reportedly confused and disappointed to learn I was gay.

INTERVIEWER

Let's go back to your early years as a novelist. You mentioned you'd written several novels but couldn't get any of them pub-

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lished until you were thirty-three. What difficulties were you experiencing?

WHITE

I was writing gay books well before gay liberation and before there was a recognized gay reading public. One actually existed, although no publisher was aware of it. There was also a tremendous amount of self-repression among gay editors. A gay editor would turn down a gay book because if he admitted to liking it he would have to defend it in an editorial meeting, and that might lead other people to suspect *he* was gay.

INTERVIEWER

What became of all those unpublished novels?

WHITE

They are gathering dust. But I quarry them for other books I write. They are a source for a lot of information, particularly about the fifties and sixties. For instance, *A Boy's Own Story* and *The Beautiful Room* contain material from previous novels. I could not employ much of the actual language because I've come along as a stylist, but the material serves to refresh my memory of the years I was dealing with, when I was in my twenties and early thirties. It's very easy to rewrite the past in your mind and to assume that in the sixties you had the same sophistication—let's say politically—that you might have had in the seventies. In the sixties we harbored utopian notions which were extremely naive. I feel that it's hard to recreate that naiveté unless you're faced with documents from the period.

INTERVIEWER

Why does one write a book like *A Boy's Own Story*—as a coming to grips with the ghosts of childhood once and for all, a sort of final self-analysis of one's rudiments?

WHITE

I think you're making it sound a little more pragmatic than

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it is, but there is something crucial about the relationship in that book, for me, between the narrator and the younger self. I call it the pederasty of autobiography; the older self actually loves the younger self in a way the younger self never could have felt or accepted at the time. There is a kind of lapse in time in self-approval. One is filled with self-loathing at sixteen but when one is forty one can look back with this kind of retrospective affection at the younger self—which is very curative.

INTERVIEWER

From *Nocturnes*: "We label the feelings of our childhood with the names we learn as adults and brightly, confidently refer to that old 'anguish' or 'despair' or 'elation.' The confidence of liars. For those words meant nothing to us then; what we lacked as children was precisely the power to designate and dismiss, and when we describe the emotions of one age with the language of another, we are merely applying stickers to locked trunks, calling 'fragile' or 'perishable' contents that, even were we to view them again, would be unrecognizable." Is this representative of the writer's responsibility to "tell the truth"? What precisely does that mean?

WHITE

Piaget makes a very good case for the fact that the language, and even the concepts and the thoughts we have as adults, really don't fit with childhood experience. There is a radical discontinuity between childhood experience and adult experience. We complain of a kind of amnesia, that we don't recall much of our early childhood, and Freud of course said that this was because we were repressing painful or guilty desires. But Piaget argues this couldn't be true, because otherwise we would forget only those things that were painful but remember everything else—which is clearly not the case. We have an almost blanket amnesia, and Piaget argues that the terms in which we experienced our childhood are incommensurable with the terms in which we now think as adults. It's as though it's an entirely different language we knew and lost. Therefore

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I feel that any writer who is writing about childhood, as an adult, is bound to falsify experience, *but* one of the things you try to do is to find poetic approximation; an elusive and impossible task. It is like trying to pick up blobs of mercury with tweezers—you can't do it. You nevertheless attempt to find various metaphorical ways of surprising that experience. I think you oftentimes feel *it's there*, but you can't get at it, and that's the archaeology of writing about childhood.

INTERVIEWER

In *Caracole* you write, "children never question what happens around them," although in *A Boy's Own Story* your narrator is quite inquisitive. Thus one's childhood becomes a kind of myth so that as an adult one is more dependent on imagination than memory.

WHITE

Yes, I think that our notion of what we experienced as children is highly infected by whatever is the prevailing philosophy of childhood. In other words, if you'd asked somebody in the seventeenth century to write a story of his childhood, he would have perceived it as a rough draft, an inferior version, of maturity—or as comical, deformed. Then in the nineteenth century the child becomes the angel, innocent and pure, who must be protected. And then in the twentieth century, with Freud, the child becomes a monster seething with vice and lust.

INTERVIEWER

Might we say that a true novel, when it is the fruit of the creative subconscious, is a kind of rendering of one's past as a mythology?

WHITE

It's curious that if you take certain facts from your childhood and perceive them in a kind of glow, and arrange them in a certain sequence, it will not only move you and your mother and sister, but also people who don't know you. It's very odd

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how that works and I'm not quite sure why it works. I'm always struck by it because I've *invented* childhoods for imaginary characters which seem to have a lot less impact on readers than my actual childhood has when I recount it.

INTERVIEWER

You underwent psychoanalysis for a time. Can you talk about that experience, and how it did or didn't help you to write?

WHITE

I started psychoanalysis very much as the narrator does in *A Boy's Own Story*, at the early age of fifteen, and I would say my early experiences with it were almost entirely destructive. However, towards the end of the twelve years I spent in therapy over a period of some twenty years, I did finally find a therapist who I felt approved of me in some fundamental way, and who was himself a writer. He was quite helpful to me as a writer, yet in ways that would make you smile. For instance, when I had a writer's block and I went to him, he said to me, "Well, it's very hard to write and you're feeling very frightened of it. It's simply a question of courage. You must find some courage within you and go home and write." I found that very useful advice coming from him, though I don't think I would've accepted it from anyone else. This kind of primitive advice that you could get from your grandmother turns out to be the most useful "insight" the analyst offers. And perhaps self-acceptance leads to tolerance, just as self-knowledge leads to insights into other people. I've had people say to me, not so much after reading my fiction as a book like *States of Desire*, that they felt I was a compassionate writer—I don't really know what they mean by that, as I can be pretty arrogant as a commentator on other people. But I suspect what they mean is that I'm able to put myself in other people's shoes and see things from their point of view without being too judgmental early on in the process.

INTERVIEWER

I was wondering if the analysis might not be destructive in

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the sense that you begin to feel too much guilt, and find yourself in a kind of endless process of exorcism when that guilt may be merely a minor aspect of your personality.

WHITE

I would say that writing, in its own way, is a rival to therapy. You should recognize that literature is a separate province. It has its own rules. It cannot be simply an embodiment of Freud's notions on human nature, for otherwise it will soon seem hopelessly dated and hollow.

INTERVIEWER

In *A Boy's Own Story* your character reflects: "I see that what I wanted was to be loved by men and to love them back but not be a homosexual. . . . It was men, not women, who struck me as foreign and desirable." When did you eventually conceive of your sexuality as healthy and acceptable?

WHITE

Well, I was actually in the Stonewall riot, the harbinger of gay liberation in New York in 1969. The riot itself I considered a rather silly event at the time; it seemed more Dada than Bastille, a kind of romp. But I participated in that and then was active from the very beginning in gay liberation. We had these gatherings which were patterned after women's and ultimately, I think, Maoist consciousness-raising sessions. Whether or not our sessions accomplished anything for society, they were certainly useful to all of us as a tool for changing ourselves.

INTERVIEWER

But what did you have to change? The fact that there was nothing to deny or repress?

WHITE

You see, many of us began by thinking that we were basically heterosexual except for this funny little thing, this sexual habit we had somehow picked up carelessly—but we weren't homosexuals as people. Even the notion of a homosexual culture would have seemed comical or ridiculous to us, certainly

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horrifying. We would have wanted to confine our disease to the smallest possible part of our life, to our sexual behavior and nothing else.

INTERVIEWER

You've said previously that you're writing for gays and straights. But do you think of yourself as a gay spokesman?

WHITE

It was a political act for me to sign the *The Joy of Gay Sex* at the time. The publisher could not have cared less, but for me it was a big act of coming out. Charles Silverstein, my co-author, and I were both aware that we would be addressing a lot of people and so in that sense we were spokesmen. We always pictured our ideal reader as someone who thought he was the only homosexual in the world. *States of Desire* was an attempt to see the varieties of gay experience and also to suggest the enormous range of gay life to straight and gay people—to show that gays aren't just hairdressers, they're also petroleum engineers and ranchers and short-order cooks. Once I'd written *States of Desire* I felt it was important to show one gay life in particular depth, rather than all of these lives in a shorthand version. *A Boy's Own Story* and its sequel, *The Beautiful Room Is Empty*, grew out of that.

INTERVIEWER

"The world is governed by a minority, the sexually active" is one of the boy's rationales. What do you mean by designating the sexually active as a minority?

WHITE

If you look at most people in the subway or on the street they're either sick or old or ugly or crippled or crazy. That's "most" people, and they can't get sex and sex is hard to buy; it's expensive. There are a lot of Arab men in Paris, for instance, who would do anything to get a sex partner. There are a lot of black men from the Antilles, you know, who are too poor to afford sex, except occasionally, with a prostitute.

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INTERVIEWER

Do you see the range, the reactions, the emotions in heterosexual love and homosexual love to be approximately similar?

WHITE

I think there is an equally complex gamut but the two experiences are not coincident. You can't say all the things a straight woman goes through in her courtship, marriage and divorce are the same as a gay man experiences in meeting another man, living with him and breaking up with him. They're not the same emotions, they don't occur in the same sequence nor do they have the same social repercussions. But there are enough similarities to permit us to speak to each other. When a straight man breaks up with his girlfriend, the break is often decisive; it's very hard for them to move from the end of their affair into an ongoing friendship. However, I would say that many—if not most—gay men who break up continue to be best friends. And they may even continue to live together. They may enter into a period of rivalry during which each of them tries to meet somebody new first. When that phase wears out their friendship gets mellower and better. This is something which seems unthinkable to most straight people; they don't know how we can do it, but there is a great deal of comradeship that lies under the discourse of homosexual love. There is a discourse of gay friendship, and then there is a kind of male/male friendship which straight men know about, and there is also a discourse of love which straight men have with women. The idea that those discourses can come together in one relationship, and that when the love ends the friendship can continue, astonishes many outsiders.

INTERVIEWER

Can you discuss your work process? When do you sit down to write, and what do you do to warm up?

WHITE

Oh, it's very tormented. I try to write in the morning, and I write in longhand, and I write in very beautiful notebooks

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[*White displays a couple of hardbound notebooks filled with thick, hand-laid paper*] and with very beautiful pens. I just write away, and then . . . This is a first go at it, and then I start crossing out, and it gets crazier and crazier, with inserts and so on. Finally, two or three years of this go by and then one day I call in a typist. I dictate the entire book to her or him. The typist is a sort of editor in that he or she will tell me what is really terrible and what's good, or what's inconsistent and doesn't make sense. I get together a whole version this way and then I stew over it some more. Eventually my editor reads it, and then he tells me to change things, and it goes on like that. If I write a page a day, I'm lucky. But I write less. And months go by without my writing at all, and I get very crazy when I write! Sick, physically.

INTERVIEWER

You are more neurotic when you write than when you don't?

WHITE

It's a very uncomfortable process; I don't like it all.

INTERVIEWER

In everyday life, what sort of things spark off your imagination?

WHITE

Other works of art, as I've said, challenge me. Then, when I'm writing, I find that my brain begins to store information in a different way than it usually does. That is, I'm out looking for things that I need, and I will grab them anywhere. And there's a magic which any writer can tell you about: the world provides you with just the information you need, it seems, just when you need it.

INTERVIEWER

Has it happened that you've been blocked and you go to sleep and upon waking the following morning you've been given what you needed?

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WHITE

Yes, but my plots are rather primitive, so that is not a worry. I'm more concerned with controlling the mood. I find that when I'm writing well, I have a real zest for detail, for description. When I'm not writing well, I can't think of anything to say, and there is a lackluster, mechanical quality to the writing. But, basically, when the sentences get longer and more ornate, and there's more and more sensuous detail, that's when I'm writing happily or well. When the sentences get shorter, clearer, more pure or classical, then I'm not enjoying the book and neither is the reader.

INTERVIEWER

You seem to be more a creature of inspiration than habit, which counters the dictum many writers have about getting up every morning and writing for several hours a day, come what may.

WHITE

Writers say two things that strike me as nonsense. One is that you must follow an absolute schedule everyday. If you're not writing well, why continue it? I just don't think this grinding away is useful. The other thing they say: I write because I must. Well, I have never felt that, and I doubt most of them do either. I think they are mouthing a cliché. I don't think most people write because they must; perhaps economically they must, but spiritually? I wonder. I think many writers would be perfectly happy to lay down their pens and never write again if they could maintain their prestige, professorship and PEN membership.

INTERVIEWER

In *A Boy's Own Story* you describe the character as having imaginary playmates, but he thinks, "And yet I didn't really like my imaginary playmates precisely because they were so irritatingly vague and unreal." Does it ever seem to you while writing or reading that fiction is vague and unreal?

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WHITE

Yes, and the stewing I'm talking about, getting ready to write, the thinking about writing and trying to find your way, all of that is meant to find a way of doing a scene that is full of energy, so that it has conviction, a sharp outline, progression and intensity. You should find that your writing overcomes the besetting feeling of vagueness and ennui which is characteristic of everyday life.

INTERVIEWER

In your *New York Review of Books* essay on Nabokov you wrote, "Many writers proceed by creating characters who are parodies of themselves or near misses or fun-house distortions, or they distribute their own characteristics across a cast of characters, and some especially like to dramatize their conflicts and indecisions by assigning them to different personages." How do you find yourself adapting yourself to your characters, or do they perhaps adapt themselves to you?

WHITE

Well, I do two things. One is that I pattern a lot of my characters on people I know, but there is a strictly imaginary element which creeps in after I start writing. I begin by writing a fairly close portrait of somebody I know, but then the character begins to seem real to me in his own right. If I'm stuck at some point I try to find something in my own experience that I can use, even if the character is going through something I've never experienced. I have had my writing students read Stanislavsky, and of course his whole method requires the actor to find real-life experiences to draw on for even the most improbable and wild scenes that he must portray. I think the writer must do something like that, and most writers go through that process without thinking about it. What Stanislavsky says is that you cannot hope to recuperate an emotion by going for it directly. What you can do is to reconstruct the original sensuous details of the room in which you were sitting, what you were eating, what you were wearing, whether it was hot or cold; and *if* you get all those things right, *then* the emotion

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will come flooding back, of its own. I think that is an important exercise for writers. People always ask: what do you teach in creative writing? People insist: there's nothing to teach. Well, of course, there *is* something you can teach; you teach people to find ways of tapping their own emotions.

INTERVIEWER

When you're writing, do you look more towards innovation, or towards tradition?

WHITE

Originality *is* important, and one of the dangers of creative writing classes, for instance, or any critical approach to literature, is that it under-emphasizes originality. After all, a professor of literature is trying to find a tradition, and influences, which can be traced. People would rather talk about Poe as the typically American genius than as the total kind of lunar nut that he really is. There is nothing typical about Poe; he's from the moon.

INTERVIEWER

How do you go about being original?

WHITE

Well, of course, if you ask this question of somebody in a *Paris Review* interview, he will say, "You do it by being yourself, by being true to your own vision." I think that is somewhat true. As you gain confidence as a writer, you learn to spot your own funny ways of looking at things, and you learn how to notate them—because at first, of course, it's very elusive. You've never seen your vision before, so you wouldn't know how to put it down on paper, and it might not occur to you that the vision is something suitable for writing about. After you have acquired a certain amount of technique and confidence, you learn how to notate these rather passing, elusive thoughts. A young woman came up to me once after a reading and said, "I love what you do," and I said, "What do I do?" and she said, "You completely jump over the important

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plot points, and then develop the minor things that nobody else would think to develop." I decided to profit from her intelligence.

INTERVIEWER

In *A Boy's Own Story* you evaluated your readers as "eccentric," as they were "willing to make so much out of so little." Is it not the writer, ostensibly, who must make so much out of so little?

WHITE

In *Nocturnes*, I thought I had been almost perverse in how few clues I gave to the reader, and I was *amazed* by how much was made of so little. That is, if you go back to the text, there are only the strangest little traces of slime that indicate where the snails once crawled, just a few phosphorescent, glimmering paths, and I was astonished by just how much intelligent readers were able to get out of this, and to reconstruct more or less the same picture I'd intended. It is a rather eccentric enterprise on both the part of the reader and the writer, but technically it is the reader who must be willing to take all these faint clues and reconstruct them into a novel. This is very different from the process of reading a nineteenth-century novel, where all the work has been done for you.

INTERVIEWER

The *non-dit*, the art of ellipsis, is certainly within the European tradition, and more noticeably so, I think, in post-war fiction. Isn't this not only a result of an increasing sophistication in readers, but also a reflection of the mass media which tends to condense everything for quick consumption?

WHITE

It is precisely film that has promoted the use and understanding of ellipsis. In the nineteenth-century novel, the reader was oriented for a full chapter before the action began. A film, however, will begin with one man chasing another and they're desperately racing over rooftops, and then suddenly

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they're speeding away in cars and—who are these people, and what are they doing? You don't care; you're suddenly seized by the action. Poetry also proceeds in an elliptical way. Anyone who's studied English in America, for example, has read T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Wallace Stevens, not to mention John Ashbery, and such a reader is used to suspending a demand for instant intelligibility. They're willing to wade into line after line of language without quite knowing where they are or what's happening or what it all means.

INTERVIEWER

I was wondering how your life has significantly changed in the move from New York to Paris. Has it been good for your writing?

WHITE

French people are extremely formal and they don't call you up all the time, whereas in America total strangers look you up in the phone book and want you to read their nine-hundred-page manuscript.

INTERVIEWER

What sort of notions do you have of what a writer's life should be like?

WHITE

I wish I were more at home with writing. I can go a year or two or three without picking up my pen and I'm perfectly content. The minute I have to write I become neurotic and grouchy and ill; I become like a little wet, drenched bird, and I put a blanket over my shoulders and I try to write and I hate myself and I hate what I'm writing. Writing depends upon a fairly quiet life, whereas I am a sociable person. I think every writer goes back and forth on this question; it's a constant struggle to find the right balance between solitude and society and I don't think anyone ever does. I find it reassuring to read the complaints of Chekhov: "My country house is full of people, they never leave me alone; if only they would go away I

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could be a good writer." He's writing this close to the end of his life.

INTERVIEWER

Originally you moved to Paris to be in Europe for a year or two, but five years have passed. What keeps you here in Paris?

WHITE

I think mainly the quality of life is so attractive, and there is still a certain degree of exoticism for me here. And just from a practical point of view, I can make my living here as an American journalist writing for American magazines about Europe. In New York everything is done for a motive, and people are even quite frank about it, whereas here people get together simply to have fun with each other. In a way it's more like small-town America, which I like, and not like big-city life. I think New York is a city for ambition. In Paris people cultivate social life as an art form; in New York people cultivate it as a form of self-advancement.

INTERVIEWER

Do you find journalism as pleasingly painful as writing fiction? What inspired you to turn to biography and to work on Genet?

WHITE

In both journalism and biography the *assignment* is fairly clear, which is never true of fiction. Moreover, in journalism and biography one is obliged to study, observe, record, whereas in fiction one is left to one's own melancholic devices.

INTERVIEWER

Social life has been very important in your fiction, especially in *Caracole*. Aren't people too often victims of what is fashionable, whether it be a social theory or a political ideology, and isn't that moment as subject to change as the kinds of clothing they wear?

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WHITE

I would say a novelist's proper job is to be sensitive to the way things look. I agree with Conrad that fiction is primarily a visual medium, and that there is something very concrete and valuable and eternal in any accurate description of the way things look. No one would ever require fiction to be totally divorced from its period; in fact, most people believe, and I believe, that the more it's anchored in a specific locale, period and milieu, the more universal it is. This is quite different from, for instance, espousing a Freudian view of sexuality and imposing that in a rigid way on your characters, and then ten years later a Foucaultian view—because then you get a *roman à thèse*. After all, fiction writers are not professional thinkers.

INTERVIEWER

Caracole treats fashion and *la société mondaine* in a context of political upheaval. Does fashion, for you, influence politics in any perceivable way? Why was the leitmotif of fashionable society so important to you in that novel?

WHITE

I was trying to show a society in which the conquerors were less evolved than their subjects and in which they were even intimidated by their victims. This is a situation that can be observed in life. Oscar Wilde unnerved his jailers. Wit, style and intelligence can outweigh, or at least hold at bay, brute power or wealth. The Chinese intimidated their Manchurian conquerors, just as the Nazis, upon conquering Paris, became respectful of French culture and were eager to win the approval of the subjugated. Of course, Cesare Borgia respected Urbino so much he destroyed it.

INTERVIEWER

In terms of the kinds of ideas which are a writer's staple, there is something in *Forgetting Elena* I'd like to take issue with. You write, "We all know that human emotions are banal . . ." Is this meant to provoke the reader or, for you, is it axiomatic?

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WHITE

When I say human emotions are banal I mean that they are familiar, we all have them; if we didn't we wouldn't be able to write novels that each of us could read and understand. Originality in writing is in the presentation of those emotions, or even in their occlusion—the way in which feelings are stopped or diverted or disguised.

INTERVIEWER

Writing, then, with originality should prevent the banal from creeping into the tone of the novel.

WHITE

There is a tendency to talk about the Platonic novel as though there were but one novel we're all striving to write, an ideal, perfect novel which is outside time, outside history, outside any particular cultural tradition—an eternal, floating and perfect book. An opposed point of view, which is the one I hold, is that each person has it within him to write a novel unlike everybody's else's. If you're a teacher this is very important, because you either have a normative notion of the novel, and you struggle to make all writers ascribe to your notion of what *the* great novel should be, or you have a pluralistic notion, whereby each person should write a novel unlike all others.

INTERVIEWER

Is writing a way of rendering the banal beautiful?

WHITE

Or making the banal strange. There is a term that comes up in Russian formalist criticism called *defamiliarization*. It's a way of talking about the events of everyday life (in Tolstoy, Natasha's first ball or her first opera, for example) and making them utterly weird because they are described by an innocent or inexperienced person. Good fiction often takes the banal around us and defamiliarizes it.

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INTERVIEWER

Writing from an unfamiliar point of view must be one of the great challenges of a novelist. In *The Beautiful Room is Empty*, your character at one point during his university days says he thinks the Buddhists were right in their belief that the self is an illusion, although as a writer he reacts to the individuality of everyone he meets. "I was potentially everything or nothing. I could wake up one morning gay or straight. . ." I thought this seemed like a desire to convince yourself that Edmund White, writer, transcends Edmund White, self; transcends his class, race and sexuality.

WHITE

You're right.

INTERVIEWER

Yet there are two contradictory points of view at work here.

WHITE

I'm convinced that *the self* is an illusion, and that actually all we are consists of several piles, or, as the Buddhists call them, *skandhas*, of associations and memories and so on, that the way to enlightenment is to dissolve the illusion of unity and return all these elements to their original constituents, thereby ridding oneself of the notion of identity. Although all that appeals to me philosophically, as a novelist I don't believe it. As a novelist I believe there is a kind of smell that's very distinctive about each living creature, and I enjoy being a sort of sketch artist, like a sidewalk artist, who tries to catch a likeness—and I somehow manage to believe that there are likenesses, and that they do tell you something about people.

INTERVIEWER

In *A Boy's Own Story* you write, "It seemed to me then that beauty is the highest good, the one thing we all want to be or to have or, failing that, destroy." One is immediately reminded of Yukio Mishima, who made youth and beauty

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into a cult and ultimately committed hara-kiri at the age of forty-five, already an old man by his standards. You are in the vicinity of that age now. What do you see as the "highest good"?

WHITE

Are you suggesting I make the supreme sacrifice? Artists should be honest about the tremendous glamor and impact of physical beauty. It is not fair that it should be so important, since so few people possess it, but, in fact, beauty *is* a glimpse of the beautiful. A beautiful person embodies in her or his flesh what an artist is struggling to represent in his work. But a writer shouldn't have too many answers. Barthes has a phrase in which he suggests that the artist is like Orpheus leading Eurydice out of the underworld. Everything is fine, the novel follows along behind the novelist, until he looks back. . . .

—**Jordan Elgrably**

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Four Poems by Geoffrey O'Brien

The Luminous Mammoth

The men walk among ribs.
The glow they see by is rooted in the bones.
They have entered a cavity in the cliff,
The spined hole
Around which the cliff built itself.

The rocks poke and grind
In the shape of the animal's dying.
When it had been dead long enough
A river seeped through
And forced a way under the limestone tomb.

Up from the narrows comes the night boat.
The lanterns tremble. The passengers
Crane their necks toward the scaffolding
On whose racks the inner wall of the cave
Is laid flat to dry.

A small army
Of telegraphists and sketch artists
Has set up camp around the dig.
By the light of the vertebra
They estimate the vertebra's curve.

The teeth are letters.
The wrenched mouth
Forms the alphabet of the archaic fornicators

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Who sired the shale beds
Upon which they finally lay down to decay.

In the basin where the brain was
The twelve paleontologists
Assemble around the banquet table.
They toast the kaiser
As the photographer kneels in silence.

A few yards beyond them
Squatting in the empty eye socket
The team's geometrician
Stares by bonelight
Down the corridors of the excavated beast.

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The Poetry of the Policeman

Among the ferns and cinders
Of the West Side railroad embankment
The Irish poet who lives in my head
Blinds me with stormclouds
Loosed in vengeance
Over the ancestral hills.

He gives a voice
To the remote eternal presences.
The sun sinks ever upon the lake.
The whole body of Ireland
Writhing into syllables
Sings of approaching disaster.

The cracked brick walkways of America
Have never been set to a measure.
They scrape the air's crust.
The whistle shriek wakes up the harbor
And the ghostly labor gangs
Press toward the fence gap.

The stanzas I have memorized
Function like water pressure.
They press invisible against what I see.
In the crimson flood
The church which is Ireland
Breaks at its joints.

On slow afternoons
I glance at the wanted posters, the baseball scores,
Or the nickel peep shows
Where against a backdrop of trolley tracks
A comely dark-lipped girl
Is rescued repeatedly from gangsters.

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The fresh weeds already sicken
Among the streets they have taken over.
The water tank corrodes.
From the battles for New York
The air, an open tomb,
Is all that persists.

The smashed curb affirms
That there can be no substitute for poetry.
The families receded into back rooms
And the last trace of their speech
Was swallowed by bar smoke.
The city to which they were abandoned

Reimburses me for staring
At what no one else will remember:
The grill clogged with bloodied gloves
Or the warehouse gate
Where I bend as if in prayer
To examine the shard that signifies trespass.

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Cryptograms

He has buried the garden.
The marble waits. Do not neglect
To study the wind roads.

•

It makes ready to open.
The outcasts have no mercy
Upon their place of exile.

•

Bond-servant of the moon,
It was for this you were born:
To eavesdrop on a foreign language.

•

I have killed the sentinel.
He was my brother
And was duly grateful.

•

What we know as a vase
Others will recognize
As a raised siege, a bloody deliverance.

•

The smoke
Will clear their air.
The praise song will silence us.

•

The gift
For which you were waiting
Was to have your name forgotten.

•

The five
Painted blue on the bare wall
Hides them from their speech.

•

Only to know
That the ballad went on its way
With its syllables intact.

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Fred Astaire in the Wilderness

As I set out on the conquest
of reality, my right arm
sweeps the air clear
while my left flexes

as if to suggest a stand of pines.
Dangling black branches
interrupt the empty sky.
I'm alone, there are no names

on the journey. The nerves and joints
map their own disappearance.
The dance insists
on a threshold, a boundary

to show how far
the feet are from the edge.
It's all mica-dazzle here,
without one shadow to soften it.

Mirrors burn up
in the atmosphere of this country.
I rely on muscular habit
to part the folds, find out

the obscure entrances.
The hips are a platform,
the neck an antenna
craning from wave to wave.

I begin to choreograph:
In a bleached forest
a dancer comes upon a stream
and bends to drink from it

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the memory of his origin.
Springing up, he dips
backward, and with eyes closed
cartwheels into the falls.

I mime my own story,
the body describes itself.
A song wholly alien
moves as if in response

to the gestures
it forces from me.
The stage is a new land.
It has never spoken,

has only been spoken to.
From now on I simply make up
everything that happens.
My spine, almost out of control,

quivering and curving,
invents a pathway
through the light
as it swallows me.

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Obscene Gestures for Women

Janet Kauffman

Marimba had beautiful teeth. They were not especially good teeth, or strong, but they were well-honed—small, white as the white keys on a piano, and level as the rosewood keys, come to think of it, on a marimba.

When she smiled, her front teeth rested on her lower lip, and she felt the angle, the bevelling, identical tooth to tooth.

They were not her original teeth, not exactly, although they were hers, and not fake. They were ground-down teeth. Worn to a surface sameness and sheen, likes rocks set down at a glacier's mouth. Fresh. So smooth. An astonishingly polished by-product of a fiercely tormented process.

In the end, Marimba thought of it as nature at work.

Marimba ground her teeth at night. And because she slept through that labor—and for years knew nothing of it— she for a long time woke up serene, with confidence in human achievement. She never considered why she held out hope for humanity, except that a livable life, with some effort, seemed

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possible: livable life on a livable planet. Some passion. Some ease. The knowledge of terror, but no terror. Political action. Research. Few psychiatrists. No war. Bread and butter and parmesan. Salad greens. Death when it came, as it came.

She tried not to simplify, but there it was.

Her jaw grew powerful; her face toned with exercise. And still, in her ignorance, she thought when she looked in the mirror: this is how a woman's face matures. She was pleased to see some of the sweetness disappear.

It was her mother who said, one morning on a summer visit: "Marimba. My God, you grind your teeth. It's a factory sound. It sounded like machinery in there. Rocks. Quarries. It was a terrible racket. You ought to see somebody."

And the next morning, barging into the bathroom while Marimba was brushing her teeth: "Honey, what's wrong? You're lucky you have any teeth left." Her mother bared her own teeth, a wild face in the mirror, and tapped her cockeyed front tooth. "Why don't you make an appointment to see somebody? Man-o-day, how can what's-his-name sleep with that racket?"

"His name is Michael."

"My God, how can the man sleep with that racket?"

Some things came back to Marimba then. Her elaborate cartoon dreams, for instance, where in the end, it came as no surprise—not to the compassionate trees, not to the zoo animals on the loose in living color, not to the hero-beast him or herself—when the ordinary and unremarkable teeth of the hero-creature, in consequence of nothing, cracked, grew larger somehow with fracture lines, and crumbled apart, through many frames, to the ground. It happened in precise, slow motion. Fine line drawings webbed across the surface of the teeth, and with a machine noise—engine noise, earthquake noise—that clamped everybody else's jaws flat shut, the open-mouthed hero-animal's teeth cracked into chip-sized pieces and fell very thoroughly apart.

And then the jaw jammed and ground, and the tooth pieces crushed to particles, some to sand.

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As at the end of all dreams, the dreamer vacuums the imagery and spirit of the dream into the waking mind, and Marimba woke up with her tongue scanning her teeth, thinking, Lord! Cataclysmic. The cartoon sense of order! Complete, causeless. It interested her that the impossible, the incredible, could exist in cartoon, simply because they could be conceived, and drawn.

She rubbed her jaw and praised the power of the mind, for dreaming up and producing such shows. She understood dreams as mindful dramas. She always gave them plenty of thought.

In fact, through the years, Marimba developed complex theories concerning cartoon dreams. Sometimes, in conversations at picnics, for example, she let those theories out, as theories of art: they sounded pretty good. But the same ideas, applied to the livable world, led to some distress, and she knew it. The incredible, the horrific, *could* be conceived, and drawn.

And carried out.

But there she was. In the forest preserve. She shook out the checkered cloth on the ground, opened a bottle of wine. Michael unwrapped the foil from a long loaf of bread. Claudina or Lester pulled out a Frisbee and moved off, under the powerlines. Even if the afternoon was oppressively humid, with mists all over the sumac, Marimba could roll on her side and fall asleep.

Inside the house, Marimba's dog Delaney, on waking up, yawned and shut his jaws, and ground his teeth, too.

He was an old dog, his mother a beagle, his father a terrier sort of mutt, and consequently Delaney could howl and Delaney could yap. He was a domesticated animal, as was Marimba, though neither of them knew how that happened, or quite what that meant for the future of the species.

Delaney never learned how to play dead, or how to beg, for which Marimba was grateful. He was bland in the presence of humans, steady-paced on walks, unabashedly curious about the ground and the life it harbored. He ate dirt, experimentally. He was a wary dog, not easily revolted. But easily

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pleased—too easily pleased, one might say: a chunk of hard-boiled egg could do it.

Delaney and Marimba had enough in common to regard themselves, when they regarded themselves, as two of a kind.

Before Marimba made an appointment to see anyone, she had already concluded: the problem is this—the human eyeball. The optical illusions of the mind. The illusion, for instance, which becomes the idea that one given moment follows another, discrete, self-contained—gold coins out of the mouth, filling a sack—giving time a shape. Here it is. The illusion that time is a human matter, and moves with us. Straight ahead. The illusion that we must proceed. And build. And keep an account. As if both the short and the long haul were ours, and not a careening, a warping, a folding over. Not the crush of the jaw. Not an exploding and a collapsing. As if the Alps were there, and there tomorrow, reservations available, and not even now, sand for another flatbed, humanless sea.

Marimba's house, surrounded by vacant fields, also faced one. Down the road, she could see the roofs of two trailers, and further on, a red barn. Looking the other way, when leaves were off the mulberry trees and the scrub growth along the road had keeled over, she could see a corner of the house where Claudina and Lester lived.

Lester had dentures. Claudina had her own very good teeth, although when she laughed, her mouth opened wide and displayed a range of silver alloy fillings, none of which she ever ground apart. Her motto, and explanation, was: ignorance is bliss. But she could laugh about it. She could laugh at the evening news.

She could laugh at the men who brought in heavy equipment onto the vacant field opposite Marimba's house, when the owner, nobody knew who, leased out mineral rights to a gravel company, in one of those exchanges of paperwork, dreamy as dream, which envisioned money in gravel in glacial dumps, the hills in the empty field.

An earth-mover—a mechanized steel jaw driven by one man—moved onto the vacant field, and in several hours

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chewed out the side of one hill and built another. After that, a gravel-loader positioned itself against the opened hill and gutted it, with the enormous pummeling and crushing sounds of cartoon dreams.

When Claudina came to watch from Marimba's porch, she brought with her a half-gallon Ball jar of gin and tonic, a bowl of lime slices. She could laugh at progress, and she liked to watch it.

Since the business had turned into a show, Michael carried out three dining room chairs. But Marimba sat on the porch flooring and leaned into Michael, his legs like the arms of an easy chair on either side of her. She tried to lounge. She held his ankles in her hands. She listened to Claudina, who told the story of Lester's dentures.

But Marimba got through the hours mainly by viewing a sequence, fast motion, in her mind—a trick of the trick of the mind: she saw the steel tread and teeth of the earth-mover stalled, ground into the ground; then taken over, a rapid decline, by rust, encrustations of lichen, encroachments, erosions, burials through various weathers, until the ground closed over completely, and Marimba was under there, too, and could see it. The weight of the earth and the heat pressed the earth-mover into the earth-as-it-moved. Buckled, melted, re-formed, re-moved as rock—it was and then it wasn't. Human things, all things after all, were down there, locked to the earth as it moved.

"Don't grind your teeth," Claudina was saying. "There's machinery now to do it."

And Marimba could see it was hard, emotionless work, annihilating what was.

An appointment with a hypnotherapist was set for Thursday. Marimba's mother, Marimba's dentist, Michael, Claudina, Lester, everybody in on the subject, advised her to go. What have you got to lose? they said. Marimba told them she wouldn't be put in a trance, she knew that much. But she'd give it a try. What did she have to lose? Maybe the guy would come up with some interesting ideas.

Late Wednesday afternoon, Michael and Marimba lay in

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bed. When Michael kissed Marimba, his tongue traveled slowly along her teeth. Then his own front teeth, shapely ones to her mind, settled on her lip, and she could feel the slight, exact space between them.

The gravel-mining machinery roared across the road, in full gear. Michael talked loud.

"So, aren't you happy here?" he asked. He was naked, tan to his waist.

Marimba frowned. "Ecstatic, sometimes. This is fine!" Her voice rose, and she aimed it out the window. "It's that out there!"

"Well, something's bothering you."

"The world. What's done to the world bothers me. That out there."

"But grinding your own teeth! Jesus. What's that do for the world? You hurt yourself. Feel that. Flat teeth." He leaned over, such a sweet person, and rubbed his finger between the bite of her teeth. "Flat teeth."

"It's better than hurting somebody else." Marimba hesitated to say the words clearly, not at all approving the sound of hurt to herself.

"So you grind the enamel off. You spend days at the dentist, they cap your teeth. You buy a plastic guard. You shred that. You grind the caps away. Jesus. A great contribution to life." He chewed a little at one of her fingertips. "They say it's sex, you know. Teeth, vagina, bodily orifices, and so on. You're miserable about something."

"Everybody's miserable about something," Marimba said. She was not undecided about it. "They *should* be. It's not sex. That's one thing I'm *not* miserable about."

"Well, if that *is* the problem, you wouldn't know it, right? Isn't that the way it goes?" He leaned over again, and this time just let himself down, the length of his weight resting easy, the way he could rest when he wanted to, very comfortable there on top of her.

His ear was close to her mouth, and she could whisper. "How about this?" she said. "What if I tell the guy, 'This is a political problem. It's not personal.' How about that? It's true. I'll tell him a bad habit can be political."

The machinery outside geared up, working another hill.

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Marimba talked louder. And, pretty generously, she thought, she aimed her voice away from Michael's ear and shouted into the thicknesses of his hair. "'You give me a decent world,' I'll tell him, 'I'll stop gnashing my teeth.' He'll take notes. He'll take notes, won't he? Sex, dash, dash, for the body and of the body! Mineral rights, gravel rights, dash, dash, nothing to do with body! Says noise of machinery, dash, dash, noise of attack! Rape! Defilement. Money extorted from the ground!"

"Good God," Michael said. "Shut the window."

She wore her white slacks instead of jeans, and sat with her legs slightly apart, at ease, as the man had suggested. Still, she was aware of a kink developing in one thigh. The man lit a pipe. With her eyes shut, she could hear his breath in the stem of the pipe, and then the aroma of the tobacco moved in two channels of air she could picture clearly, around her head. She thought it odd, thoughtless, really, that he'd smoke a pipe in a closed room, with a woman hypnotized in front of him.

Marimba made a note in her head to mention this point, when she opened her eyes. If he'd never thought of this behavior as a problem, what else hadn't he thought of?

Behind her closed eyes, Marimba watched. Kept track. She let her body sit like a well-placed shell, right there, in the chair opposite the man with the pipe.

When she'd first sat down, he'd asked her what she believed, specifically, to be the cause of her stress.

Specifically? She'd given him a list of things she'd noticed, driving to his office: the farm on Packard sub-divided; the white stretch limo that passed her; two kids hounding a boy on a bike; all the headlines of all the papers; the design of his office building, a box of boxes; the geometric use of shrubbery, all that.

He said, "Well, I see."

He said, "Find a spot to look at in the carpet, and just look. Just listen to me and look at the carpet."

Marimba had never thought very much of carpeting, in fact believed it to be another instance of a peculiarly human cover-up of the natural world, but she kept her mouth shut about that, and found a spot in the carpet, as instructed. She

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pretended the spot on the carpet was a chunk of dirt on the ground. And she stared at it for as long as he said.

Marimba explained to her mother at dinner, "He sucked his pipe. All the time my eyes were shut, he sucked his pipe!"

"Lots of men suck their pipes," her mother said.

"Well, it wasn't smart," Marimba insisted. "It's a very ignorant thing in a hypnotherapist."

"He told her she was angry at the world," Michael said.

"*I* told him I was angry at the world," Marimba said. "This is new information to nobody."

"He told her to give the world the finger," Michael said. "If you see an obscene gesture here, you'll see a post-hypnotic suggestion at work. She's to do that instead of grinding her teeth."

"At night," Marimba said. "The suggestion is: display hostility rather than self-inflict it. Screw the world, he says. He says, you don't know how many men go around, surreptitiously giving their bosses the finger. He says it works. Releases the anger. Does no harm. He says this to me, Mother, while my eyes are shut, and he sits there sucking his pipe!"

"Oh my darling," her mother said.

"I made notes," Marimba said, "for when I opened my eyes. I'd ask if he'd ever given thought to obscene gestures for women. Specifically for women. I'd ask, did he ever think that women, physiologically, do not screw the world. I said, 'Give me an obscene gesture for women—of women, by women—and sure, I'll use it.'"

"Oh, baby doll," Marimba's mother said. "He's only been to school. You didn't expect miracles, did you? That's such a small world, all that. He probably lives in Ann Arbor. He probably went to school there. But, listen, what was it like going under?"

"I didn't go under. I looked at a dirt spot until he said when you feel your eyes growing heavy, let them go shut. So I let them go shut. It was very ordinary, just thinking, listening to him and then waiting to open my eyes for a chance to tell him how neglectful he was of the female point of view."

"You couldn't just open your mouth and talk?" Marimba's mother said.

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"Well, I probably could have. But I'd made a deal, in a way, to shut my eyes and listen, until he said to open them. That's what I agreed in my head to do, and that's what I did."

"You *were* hypnotized then!"

"All right, I was hypnotized. I didn't open my eyes until he said so. That's how I wanted it. I was perfectly willing to wait and see what he had to say. I was making lists."

"Good grief, your eyes were shut and you sat there. He tells you to give the world the finger, and honey, you sit there. That is amazing! What part of the world are you to aim at, that's what I want to know."

"He was sucking his pipe, too."

"Oh, honey," she said. She shook her head and made a hissing noise through her teeth. "So how do you know if this post-hypnotic suggestion works? Do you think it'll take?"

"I'll watch her at night," Michael said. "Keep clear of her arm."

"I won't do it," Marimba said. "I knew it as soon as he told me. Too many people screw the world. It doesn't make sense."

"Hey, I've got one!" Marimba's mother said. She stood up from the kitchen table. She held one hand in the air, a flourish, for effect, and made a fist. She pulled the thumb inside the fist, and brought the fist down.

"There! An obscene gesture for women," she said. "What do you think, honey? Yank! Hey, the Yankee! You grab him, you got him. He's in your hand. A good fist! A powerful fist. What do you think?"

"It's not obscene," Marimba said.

"Well, all the better. Of course it's obscene! You just say so. Direct. Sexual. A woman's angle. Not abusive, not an attack, so that's even better. Michael, what do you think?"

"Good God. Don't ask me. It looks rough to me."

"That's good then. It's a rough world," Marimba's mother said. She yanked her fist through the air again. "But Man-o-day, what a beauty."

When Marimba ground out another filling, she told her dentist she wanted a hypnotherapist who knew about teeth.

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About the jaw. "That's all," she said. "I don't want to talk about anything else."

He turned out to be a retired dentist, who hypnotized as a hobby. He wore a white dentist's coat, and he did the talking.

"It is very simple," he said. "What is tense must be relaxed. What is taut must be loosed. What is bad must be made good."

They were in a dentist's office, the same as if she'd gone for a cavity. She sat in the patient's chair, and the dentist tipped the chair back slightly. "Now," he said. "Look at the ceiling."

It was a cheap tile ceiling, with shiny flecks scattered through the material, silver and white. "Pick a spot," he said, "like a star." He turned his back. "Any star. Keep your eyes on that one spot, and listen to my voice."

Marimba stared at one fleck until her eyes watered, and the dentist said, "Now shut your eyes."

She shut her eyes.

The man moved around the office, opening drawers, clinking metal objects against countertops, maybe cleaning up, Marimba thought, but why?

She liked him, though, for walking around, and not sucking a pipe.

He said, "Now set your arm on the arm of the chair, wrist up. Like that. Now open your hand. Flex the fingers. Open your lips, too," he said. "Breathe easy. Let your palm breathe. Let the air go by your lips. It's very simple," he said.

"It's like saying hello, when you want to say hello, don't you see?" he said. "There's an empty universe out there. You breathe in it. Say hello. That's about all you can do, sleeping. The rest of the time it is up to you, of course."

He shuffled some papers. "I'm leaving the office for five minutes," he said. "When I come back, your eyes will be open and you will feel fine."

The door shut. There was air-conditioning in the room, a hum of that machinery, and something else, maybe a clock. Marimba flexed the fingers of her right hand. Her jaw went

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slack. Air moved through her lips. She could hear it. The air of the universe, all right. There it was. The universe wasn't empty, she knew that. The air of the earth was not pure. But there it was.

"You can open your eyes now," the dentist said. His voice came from the hallway.

She opened her eyes. "That wasn't five minutes," she said. "I was waiting five minutes to open my eyes."

The night of July the Fourth, not long after plum-size fireworks had disappeared from the horizon, Delaney the dog breathed a few times more loudly than usual, and died. Marimba and Michael listened to his chest, off and on, until they were both convinced there was nothing more there, and no chance.

They wrapped him in burlap and buried him under a tree.

The next morning—it was no surprise, really, that kind of thing happens—something had got at Delaney's grave. The sod was kicked up, into a heap, and the burlap was ripped, pulled halfway out of the ground.

They dug a deeper hole, re-buried Delaney; they stretched a section of chicken wire over the dirt as a barrier, set sod down again, and watered everything with a hose.

That time, he stayed put.

Through the summer, Marimba slept very well. The post-hypnotic flex system seemed to work, although she didn't completely trust it. She kept a plastic mouthguard on hand, as a back-up.

In the middle of the night, if Michael touched her on the arm, or on her thigh—well, if he touched her at all—she spat out the guard, and turned over to him. She kissed the mole on his chest first, and then she kissed his mouth. After that, even if the machines across the road were going at it, overtime, with floodlights on, one or the other managed to say, since they both liked to hear the words in the dark, "Listen. There's an empty universe out there."

Marimba could feel the words take shape in her mouth. She could hear them exit between her teeth.

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Portfolio

Dot Drawings

Lucas Samaras

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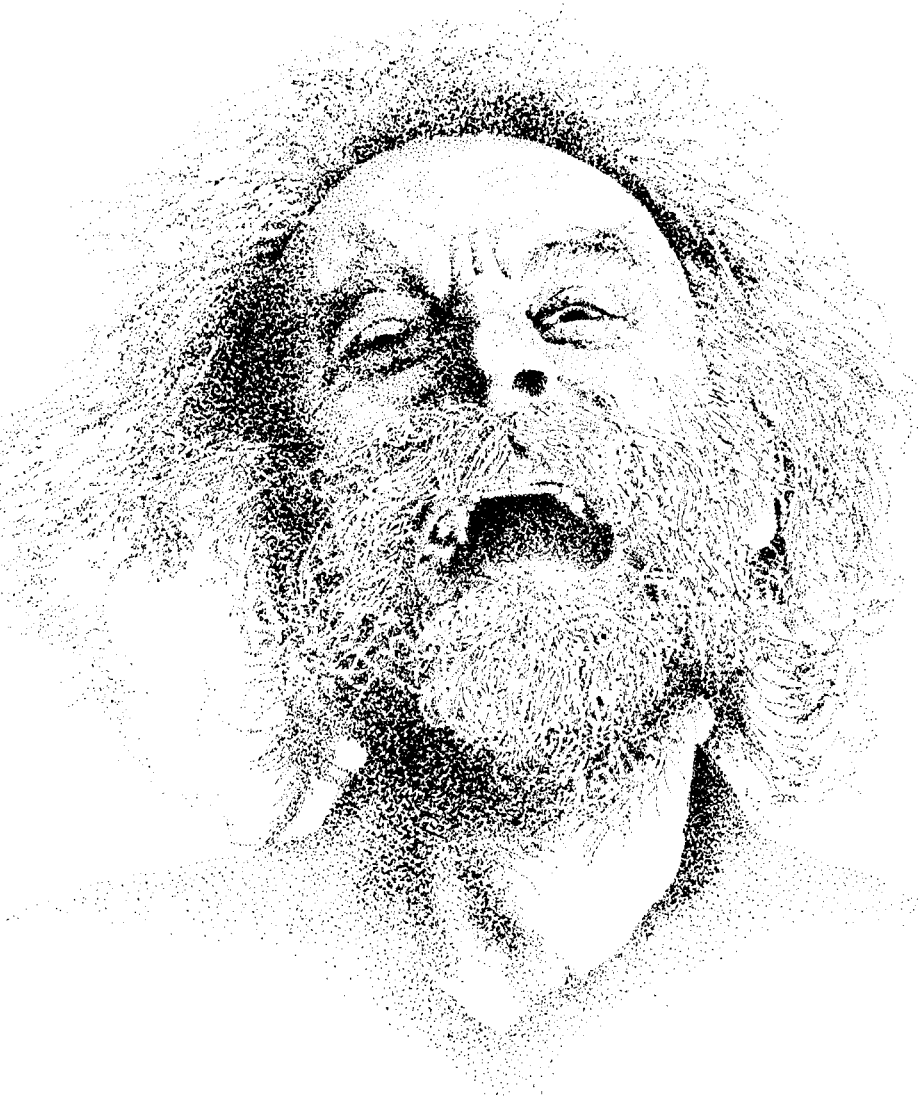

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George Rylands: Recollections

George Rylands has lived in King's College, Cambridge, since 1927 when he first became a fellow and a don. His residence consists of two large rooms divided by a corridor, a small bedroom at the back, a kitchen and a bathroom. The apartment is known as the Old Provost's Lodge and the spacious study and drawing-room below are still used by the present provost, while the grand staircase is adorned with portraits of past college dignitaries.

The rooms are lined with books and filled with an abundance of antique china and silver. Pictures by various friends and also a Constantin Guys and a Ghika hang on the walls. The doors and fireplace of the north room were painted by

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Dora Carrington in 1928 with pink, apricot and gray motives that are remarkably preserved: "I had no possessions then—I have a lot now, as you see—and Carrington offered to help by painting the doors," Rylands explains as he shows me around. The high recessed window, where we sit on a sofa to talk, looks out on the west view of King's Chapel and Gibbs' splendid building, the south front of Clare College and the glassy waters of the river Cam. On this sunny late-April day the avenues are lushly carpeted with daffodils and bluebells, and the stream dotted with varieties of duck. Now and again a punt glides past—a timeless scene.

Dadie (everyone calls him by his nickname) Rylands was born in 1902. He was a Scholar at Eton and at King's College, Cambridge, where he read classics and English literature. After graduation he worked for a few months at the Hogarth Press with Virginia and Leonard Woolf, who printed and published two volumes of his poetry. He then wrote his fellowship thesis, "Words and Poetry," also published by the Hogarth Press, and came back to King's as a director of studies. Over the years, he has held the offices of steward, lay dean and domus bursar.

George Rylands' life has been devoted to two passions—English literature and the theatre, especially Shakespeare ("my particular plot of ground"). A plethora of top producers and actors started with him as undergraduates: Michael Redgrave, Peter Hall (Director of the National Theatre), Trevor Nunn (Artistic Director of the Royal Shakespeare Company), John Barton (RSC), Ian McKellen (NT), Derek Jacobi, and others. Older stars like Sir John Gielgud and Dame Peggy Ashcroft have been directed by him and are among his close friends. Several of Britain's most celebrated actors state that Dadie taught them "to speak," and he has been responsible for the discovery of many talented writers—among them Rosamond Lehmann, whose first novel, Dusty Answer *(1925), was published on his recommendation.*

Over the years Dr. Rylands has lectured for the British Council in Europe, published many essays and reviews in leading literary publications, and has given frequent broadcasts.

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But it is above all as a lecturer, tutor, and mentor that he is remembered and loved by generations of students, many of whom have since achieved distinction in the literary and media worlds. Among his pupils Dadie remembers the editor of The Paris Review, *George Plimpton, with special affection as being "original, different from anybody else, and very jolly!" All speak of his infectious enthusiasm and passionate advocacy of his favorite books and plays.*

Rylands was honored by Cambridge University with a Doctorate of Literature in 1976. In 1987 he became a Companion of Honour—a prestigious title which is a personal gift of Her Majesty the Queen.

This interview took place at Dr. Rylands' rooms, in King's College, Cambridge, in the spring and summer of 1987.

INTERVIEWER

Let us begin at the very beginning of your life: where were you born and brought up?

GEORGE RYLANDS

I was born in a village in Gloucestershire, and I was taught first at home, by a village schoolmistress—a very gifted woman. At eight I was sent to Dorset, where my mother's sister and her husband had started a preparatory school. My uncle had been a master at Marlborough, and the prep school they set up became very successful. They had a daughter who was two years older than I and, being a girl, much more advanced. We were deeply devoted to one another and my education owed much to her—and my happiness. As you know, she became a famous historical novelist and biographer: Hester Chapman.

INTERVIEWER

From the prep school you went to Eton; were you equally happy there?

RYLANDS

It was not a happy period, being during the First World

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War, and in college we were rather starved and ill. Then my older brother was killed flying, just before the war ended, which broke my mother's heart. But I was wonderfully taught, particularly by George Littleton, who was absolutely marvellous. He taught me all I know about English literature, and I loved him. He found an eager response in me. Have you read his correspondence with Rupert Hart-Davies? There are five volumes of it and well worth reading. What was lucky was that I had got a scholarship, which meant that I could be educated for eight dollars a term. This was wonderful for my parents, who didn't have much money. But of course they had to pay for a top hat and tail coat and that sort of thing.

INTERVIEWER

After Eton you came to Cambridge, King's College, in 1921. What was Cambridge like in those days?

RYLANDS

It was a nice little old-fashioned country town attached to the university, with a market in the middle. There were no Woolworths and Boots and Marks & Spencer then. There were some bicycles and you could still see people getting about on horses. Now you would think you're in Oxford Circus or Victoria Station!

INTERVIEWER

Did they have buggies and horse-drawn taxis?

RYLANDS

No. They were before I came up. There were horse-trams, which took people to the station, and there was a hansom cab outside the university church, but they were basically gone. Soon we had taxis. My mother drove a dogcart with two horses when I was a boy, but my father had a car in 1903, still rare in those days. By 1921 a lot of people had cars—they had even invented tanks by then! I'm so old that people ask me questions about before I was born. Once a woman asked me if I remembered the Crimean War and the Battle of Waterloo!

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People did the same with Diana Cooper, but she did give the impression that she *had* lived forever and ever—she became a historical object.

INTERVIEWER

When you went down from Cambridge, you got a job in London with Virginia and Leonard Woolf at the Hogarth Press. How did that come about?

RYLANDS

My godfather, the Earl of Moray, had left me $150 in his will, which was wonderful, because it enabled me to pay off my debts—I had got into the usual deep waters as an undergraduate. I also sold my Eton gold Shakespeare medal. I had met Virginia and Leonard Woolf while staying with John Maynard Keynes and his ballerina wife, Lydia Lopokova, in 1923. So in 1924 I went straight to the basement of Tavistock Square and was more or less left alone by V. and L. I was a sort of dogsbody, wrapping parcels, typesetting, and frequently covered in printer's ink. Virginia and I used to stand side by side in the afternoon setting type. I was very happy.

INTERVIEWER

Working at Hogarth Press, you published a volume of your own poetry . . .

RYLANDS

Two volumes. It was a limited edition, typeset by Virginia and myself and very rare now. The second volume was published under the influence of dear Tom Eliot who said, "I'll publish this in *Criterion*"—which he was then editing—"if Virginia and Leonard don't print it straight away." But they did print it straight away!

INTERVIEWER

They later published your thesis, *Words and Poetry*, which is also very rare now.

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RYLANDS

The first part was about the use of words in English poetry which have certain traditions and associations. The second part was about Shakespeare's style and language, which at that time was—I thought—neglected. Then dear Leonard Woolf said "We will publish it!" and they did. Lytton Strachey wrote the introduction. It has been out of print for forty years. It was quite a pioneering book in 1928, but since then I have thought long about the diction of poetry and have written about it. The years go by and one must realize that what one has to say is no longer valuable. What *was* valuable was directing a whole generation of young actors and directors, like Michael Redgrave, Peter Hall, Derek Jacobi, Trevor Nunn, Ian McKellen . . . who went on to do good work in the theater.

INTERVIEWER

When you were at the Hogarth Press, you must have met all the other members of the Bloomsbury set—Lytton Strachey, Ottoline Morrell.

RYLANDS

I already knew Lytton through T.J. Sheppard, who was my classics tutor and later provost of King's, and whose protégé I was. We became great friends, and later I used to go and stay at Ham Spray, Lytton and Carrington's house in Berkshire.

INTERVIEWER

Did you ever go to Garsington House, Ottoline Morrell's house in Oxfordshire?

RYLANDS

No. I would have gone if I had been at Oxford. I met her in London and liked her enormously—her voice, her appearance, everything about her. She was a wonderfully generous woman, and all her life what she regretted was not to have been allowed to go to university, and that higher education was denied to her. Because of course in those days girls from

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ducal houses were taught at home. Fatal! She cultivated people before they became famous and was good to all of them. They used to go to her house and meet interesting people, and were encouraged in their own creativity by dear Ottoline.

INTERVIEWER

Then why were Lytton and Virginia so bitchy about her?

RYLANDS

You know, they really loved her, but were being clever and malicious among themselves. And she *was* in some ways rather comical. But she was also an extraordinary woman. For example, during the First World War Lytton, Aldous Huxley and others went to Garsington and were given eggs and butter and other things which were severely rationed. Ottoline gives an account of the ingratitude of her guests in her memoirs, the D.H. Lawrences in particular. She was deeply wounded—especially the way Lawrence caricatured her in *Women in Love*. It doesn't surprise me; Lawrence was rather a terror, a genius but not lovable.

INTERVIEWER

How did Virginia Woolf manage to run the Hogarth Press, write books, and have a busy social life?

RYLANDS

The whole of the morning was devoted to writing, until lunch time. Usually in the afternoon she would come down for an hour or so and set up type with me. Then we would go up two floors and have tea and gossip about people and books, and sometimes she did another session after tea. They used to go to the country for a month or two at a time and that was entirely devoted to writing as well.

INTERVIEWER

What about the famous Bloomsbury soirées? Did you go to any of Ottoline's parties in Bedford Square? Or the Keynes's?

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RYLANDS

I went to some. Maynard and Lydia gave very good parties at which we devised theatricals. My friendship with Keynes started in 1921 and went on till his death in 1946. He had been an Eton Scholar like me, so when I came up as an undergraduate he asked me to lunch. Later I became a great friend of his wife's as well. She was a marvellous dancer with the Diaghilev Ballets Russes, an entrancing dancer, but gave it up when she married him.

INTERVIEWER

Wasn't Keynes a homosexual? Or *ça n'empêche pas les sentiments,* as the French say.

RYLANDS

Partially, I suppose! I don't think anybody could love a woman more than he loved Lydia—he simply adored her. She gave him the happiest ten years of his life, then he died. I once did an evening with Lydia at the Arts Theatre, London, part ballet, part poetry—Shakespeare and Milton. Freddy Ashton danced with Lydia and choreographed it, Constant Lambert conducted the orchestra, and Cecil Beaton took the photographs. It was a big success.

INTERVIEWER

Who else came to the Bloomsbury soirées?

RYLANDS

Aldous Huxley came, because he was a great friend of Raymond Mortimer who was the literary editor of the *New Statesman*, and lived off Gordon Square. Roger Fry, Bernard Shaw, the Woolfs, various Stracheys, Carrington, etc. Everybody one knew.

INTERVIEWER

When did you leave the Hogarth Press and come back here?

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RYLANDS

In 1927, as soon as my dissertation was successful and I became a fellow of King's. I have been here ever since. The first term I shared these rooms with the provost while his new lodgings were being built. I used to give parties that were terribly noisy and went on for hours—it must have been awfully uncomfortable for the dear little fellow. I immediately started giving lectures—on Wordsworth and Coleridge—although I wasn't appointed to a university lectureship till later. I also began producing plays for the Marlowe Society. Among my first pupils was Michael Redgrave and he played Edgar in my production of *King Lear.* I have seen many *Lears* over the years, but Michael's Edgar was far the best one I have ever seen. This caused quite a sensation, and I went on to produce other plays for the Amateur Dramatic Club—*Treasure Island*, *The Importance of Being Earnest,* etc. . . .

INTERVIEWER

I believe that Wittgenstein came to see your *Lear* and was most impressed by it?

RYLANDS

He sent me a note saying he wanted to see me. So I invited him to King's. We walked round and round the front court and he explained to me why it was that I'd got *Lear* right! He was wonderfully enthusiastic and couldn't stop talking; it was all very strong stuff, about the proper meaning of this, that and the other. I was entranced but can't remember a word of it! Things which I knew already and which he had gathered from seeing my production.

INTERVIEWER

Bertrand Russell recalls in his autobiography that Wittgenstein came to see him one day in a state of agitation and said, "Tell me, am I a genius or a fool?" To which Russell answered, "Why do you want to know?"

RYLANDS

Brilliant answer! Never heard it before. One of his old

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pupils wrote a very good memoir of him. Apparently, he would take two or three pupils for supervision, talk non-stop for an hour or more, become totally exhausted and say, "Let's go to the flicks!" So they would all go to the cinema and he would sit very close to the screen and watch until he recovered his energy.

INTERVIEWER

He had a housekeeper who cooked him bacon-and-egg for breakfast every day. One day she changed and gave him something else. Wittgenstein was very upset and shouted at her, "I don't care what I eat as long as it's always *the same*!" But let's go back to your undergraduate days at King's. Apart from acting, I believe you also started a poetry society?

RYLANDS

Yes, with a fellow student called George Thompson, who later became professor of Greek at Birmingham University. He was mad about Irish poetry and translated a famous book from Erse, also Aeschylus. Anyway, in 1921 we started a society devoted to writing, translating and discussing poetry, and we called it the Rupert Brooke Society. Rupert had died in the war and had become a rather glamorous, mythical figure. He was very handsome and had written an interesting book called *John Webster and the Elizabethan Drama* which had got him his fellowship and contributed to the revival of Jacobean playwrights. He had also written some rather good poetry, was charming and beautiful, and altogether it was a terrible loss. We translated a Greek play into English, wrote poetry and read to each other, that sort of thing.

INTERVIEWER

What do you think of Rupert Brooke's poetry now?

RYLANDS

He was undoubtedly a very gifted young man, and I think of its kind "Grantchester" is an amusing, delightful poem. Some of his sonnets are quite accomplished too. But he was

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not as good as Wilfred Owen or Siegfried Sassoon. Owen is the greatest and the most tragic of his generation.

INTERVIEWER

Rupert Brooke's death is supposed to have turned Sir John Sheppard's hair white overnight, is that true?

RYLANDS

Absolutely not! Sheppard was not a hero-worshipper. He believed that Rupert's brother, who was also killed, was a more interesting man. In fact he was rather critical of Rupert, because he thought there was too much glamor about him. I think his white hair was due to the death of so many young friends and relatives in the First War.

INTERVIEWER

You once told me that two passions have ruled your life: English literature and the theater, in particular Shakespeare. Let's start with the latter. When did you first get involved with the theater?

RYLANDS

When I was at Eton I was determined to produce *Twelfth Night* in College Hall—a very beautiful setting—and to give the proceeds to the Eton Mission. Permission was granted; I directed it and played the part of Viola. It was a success. I was seventeen and it was my last year at Eton. When I arrived at Cambridge I immediately acted in the *Oresteia*, and played the part of Electra. Later I directed a number of Greek plays without acting in them.

INTERVIEWER

Where did you put on the plays?

RYLANDS

The *Oresteia* was performed at the old Town Theatre, one of those wonderful Victorian buildings which were later pulled down, alas. But all productions were given at the undergraduate theater, the little ADC. In my second term I acted

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in an Edwardian comedy; I took the part of a disagreeable and fashionable maiden aunt on the Riviera! Then I played the murderess Alice, in the anonymous Elizabethan play, *Arden of Feversham*, and so on. Two years later I stopped performing to work for my exams. Afterwards I played the Duchess in *The Duchess of Malfi*. Cecil Beaton took the photos and one of his photos was published in *Vogue*—the first time that his work was accepted by a glossy magazine, and it launched him.

INTERVIEWER

Why didn't you become a professional actor? You certainly had the looks and the talent for it.

RYLANDS

I knew what happened all too often to aspirants who went on the stage; it was an awful struggle and they were frequently out of work. I had no reason to suppose that I would be very good at it. I adored my college and wanted to teach. I was made lay dean, steward, bursar, etc . . ., so that the college became my life. But my experience in amateur theater meant that when the war came in 1939 I took on the responsibility of the Arts Theatre, which was founded by Maynard Keynes, as he became much too busy with more important work.

INTERVIEWER

There were no women in undergraduate productions, although there were two women's colleges at Cambridge. Why was that?

RYLANDS

The girls at Girton and Newnham were not allowed to be out late and had to be chaperoned. This was in the twenties and rules were strict; they thought the girls would be wasting their time, and so they were forbidden to act. They were keen to show that the girls were as good as men—which they were, and better! So we did the women's parts ourselves, but that was all right because Shakespeare's women parts were written for boys anyway. When I wanted to direct *Antony and Cleopatra* for the Marlowe Society, I said, "Look here, I *have*

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to have a girl for Cleopatra!" At that time the rules had become a little more relaxed, and a beautiful girl from Girton took the part. She later became an actress and is still acting—her name was Frances Rowe. She was beautiful and a very good speaker.

INTERVIEWER

At one point you became involved with the commercial theater in London. How did that happen?

RYLANDS

Through dear John Gielgud. I met him in 1927, when I came back here, and later Peggy Ashcroft. Then in 1944 Gielgud asked me to direct him in *Hamlet*. He had started a repertory company and Peggy was to play Ophelia. She had accepted to join the company on condition that the next production be *The Duchess of Malfi*, which she always longed to play. She had seen one of my productions at the Arts Theatre here and wanted me to direct both plays, which I did. We became great friends and have remained so.

INTERVIEWER

All this meant that you didn't write any more books for a while. Then came your *The Ages of Man*, a Shakespeare anthology which Gielgud later staged. Did you write it for him? Or was it Somerset Maugham who first had the idea? How did you come to meet him?

RYLANDS

Now how *did* I meet dear Willie? Who introduced me? Can't think! Anyway, I used to go and stay with him in the south of France. One day he said to me, "I can't go through the whole Shakespeare again, but I would like to have the cream by my bed to look into. Will you do it?" I said yes. And I did it, very quickly, and he had it published by his publishers, Heinemann. It became a best-seller and sold out over and over again. What was interesting was that dear John Gielgud wrote to me in the 1950s saying, "I have to give a Shakespeare recital for the British Council and I don't know

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where to begin! What am I to do?" I said, "You better get hold of my book, *The Ages of Man*." He did, called his recital by the same title and toured the whole world with it. He was angelic, you know—gave me a royalty on all performances. Wasn't that generous? After all, *I* hadn't written it, Shakespeare had! Later I produced the whole Shakespeare canon on LP records for the British Council—plays, sonnets, the lot! They are out of print now, but apparently a selection will soon be put out on cassettes. I used a lot of my students as well as famous actors and actresses.

INTERVIEWER

After your successful season with Gielgud and Ashcroft in London, were you tempted to stay on as producer?

RYLANDS

Not really. I did a very early television production of *Troilus and Cressida* for the BBC, but that was all.

INTERVIEWER

But you did go to New York to produce *The Duchess of Malfi* with Elizabeth Bergner and Canada Lee, a black actor playing a white role. Apparently it was quite an adventure.

RYLANDS

Canada Lee was acting at the time in a blackamoor propaganda play in New York . . . if I told you the whole story you'd be here till tomorrow! So I'll reduce it. I had never been to America, but because of the success of *The Duchess of Malfi* in London, Elizabeth Bergner asked me to produce it for her in America. She had always longed to play it, and she and her film-impresario husband cabled me the offer. I accepted, and off I went. Everything that could go wrong went wrong! We were to open in Providence, Rhode Island, on that Thursday and had been rehearsing for two weeks solidly. A week before the opening I suggested that we have a run-through. The main actor (I can't remember his name now), who we had been told was such an intellectual and played in all sorts of English high-brow things, could not remember a single word! So I said,

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"Don't worry! You're having a nerve-storm; this kind of thing can happen to anyone; rest and tomorrow you'll do it beautifully." Next morning I arrived at the theater and found a cable from him saying he had withdrawn from the part! This was Saturday and the play was opening the following Thursday! A new man had to be found, and fast! They said there was this *fantastic* black called Canada Lee who had played in films and was now in a play in New York which was closing that very night. As it happened, I had seen the play and liked Canada in it. He had played Othello and Caliban and I thought he could do it. Bosola is supposed to have Arabic blood and is a sort of gangster whom the Italian dukes have engaged to do their dirty work, so I thought it didn't matter if it was played by a black actor. I went to see Canada. He was absolutely thrilled and jumped at the offer, wild with enthusiasm. Next morning he came to the theatre to work with me alone and get started. On that Monday he had to go to a political meeting in Detroit at which he was the guest speaker. This was in 1946 and the civil rights movement had already begun. He came back from the meeting and we all flew to Providence on that Wednesday, the day before the first dress-rehearsal. By the time the curtain went up on the first dress-rehearsal, Canada had mastered only one act of the play! But he came on, wearing his Renaissance clothes and wig, having painted his face blotting-paper *pink*! He had decided that since he was playing with white actors he should be white! Anyway, we persuaded him to take the paint off. We had a dress-rehearsal on the afternoon of the opening, and again he broke down and couldn't remember his lines. So it was agreed that I would have to play it that evening, opening night, and that he would go away and try to learn it for the Monday performance at the Schubert Theatre in Boston. I had played the Duchess and Ferdinand, but never Bosola! Still, it had to be done. I went for a walk by myself and came back to the theater to get ready. We had no proper dressing rooms, the place having been a cinema originally, and the basement was given over to the whole cast. But up a little staircase there was a tiny room for Elizabeth and another for Canada Lee. So I went up to get my clothes and wig from Canada, and found him sitting there,

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making himself up, surrounded by reporters and photographers. "Oh George!" he said, "I thought I'd do the first act and *you'd do the rest*!" I had to explain to him that it was impossible, that we would be the laughingstock. Eventually I took the clothes and wig and went downstairs. I went on and did it. It went fairly well, because of course everyone had rallied round, and afterwards Elizabeth and I went to her hotel and sat on her double bed drinking champagne, wondering what would happen next! In Boston, we decided to rehearse on arrival; Canada came on saying, "Wonderful! I've got it! I've got it!" So I said, "Let's start with act three." But he couldn't remember a thing! Two professional actors, experienced, and they couldn't remember their lines. I suppose Webster's idiom was too difficult for them. They could understand the part but not the words.

INTERVIEWER

It reminds me of a very famous French actor who, in old age, could not remember his lines and used to invent them. Once Jean Anouilh got very cross with him and said, "But I haven't written those words!" To which the actor replied, "*Que voulez-vous Monsieur, que je joue votre pièce ou que je dise votre texte?*"

RYLANDS

That's it. So he "acted" the play, on the Monday and Tuesday in Boston. On Wednesday I saw him stumble through the matinée, then I flew to New York and back to King's College, where I was then the bursar. I never went back to America. But I have kept a good memory of it, because Elizabeth and her husband were enchanting to me and I adored them. I never saw her again, alas, although she came to live in London where she died a couple of years ago. She became a friend of Peggy Ashcroft's and they saw each other. But Elizabeth was a winner—very mischievous and funny.

INTERVIEWER

Let us move on to another society with which you were involved at Cambridge—the Apostles. It was a very exclusive so-

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ciety, its members had to be elected and swear to secrecy. As you know, it achieved tremendous notoriety when some of its distinguished members turned out to be Soviet spies—Guy Burgess, who defected to Russia with McLean in 1954, and Sir Anthony Blunt, who became the Keeper of the Queen's picture collection. Can you tell us about the Apostles and your experience of it?

RYLANDS

The Apostles started when Tennyson was an undergraduate, and he and his friend Hallam became Apostles. Indeed there is a stanza in *In Memoriam* about the society. It was really a debating society: one was proposed by an older member, called one's "Father," invited to a preliminary session, and if judged suitable, elected. My own "Father" was Sebastian Sprott, a remarkable man who became a professor of philosophy and psychology at Nottingham University, and who was a very close friend of Forster's. We met on Saturday nights, someone would read a paper, and we would discuss it, speaking in turns. The main subjects were philosophy, ethics, aesthetics, and had to do with personal conduct, emotions and relationships. The ex-members were called "Angels," and sometimes they would look in and take part: Bertrand Russell came, G.E. Moore, G.M. Trevelyan, Leonard Woolf, E.M. Forster.

INTERVIEWER

Why the secrecy?

RYLANDS

Simply because it was a small body of people who cared passionately about intellectual matters. It was very serious and high-minded, though totally unsnobbish. It was not meant to be socially fashionable or smart.

INTERVIEWER

How did people like Guy Burgess, who by accounts was a rather dissolute character and a spy, or Anthony Blunt, equally undesirable, get elected?

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RYLANDS

Because they were very clever people! Guy Burgess could have become a fellow of Trinity College; Anthony Blunt was a distinguished art historian. But they came ten years after me, in the thirties, when things had changed. Sociology had become an important subject, and the themes of discussions had become more connected to immediate social problems. My generation never discussed politics!

INTERVIEWER

But the atmosphere of the thirties was very conducive to political involvement: there was the Great Depression, the hunger marches, which often went through Cambridge. It must have had a tremendous effect on the students who were mostly middle and upper class and probably felt guilty about their own privileges. Were you not affected at all?

RYLANDS

I did write a poem about the hunger marches which was published in the *New Statesman*. But I didn't become politicized like the younger generation. Some of them became communists; some went to fight in the Spanish Civil War—John Cornford and Julian Bell, who got killed, and others. They must have discussed politics at the Apostles' meetings. Also I was busy being the lay dean and director of studies and so on. The Apostles' meetings I recall were about goodness, about being good, the difference between art and life, the sort of thing they had talked about since the Victorian times. Leonard Woolf's autobiography is the best source on the subject; he gives an account of when he was at Cambridge, at Trinity College, and the effect that G.E. Moore had on them all, and what the Apostles were.

INTERVIEWER

How were the meetings conducted when Moore came, as an Angel? And where did they take place?

RYLANDS

It was always on a Saturday night and various people's rooms

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were used. If you were an an active "Brother" you were supposed to keep Saturday nights free. But not everybody came every time. If Leonard Woolf or Lytton Strachey were visiting then everyone turned up. One person had to read a paper on whatever subject he liked, for about twenty minutes. Then little bits of paper were handed round with numbers on them which indicated when you were required to speak. If you were an "Angel" you did not have to speak, but they usually did. We all had to speak. You got up and stood on the hearthrug and said what you thought about the subject. It might be a few sentences or much longer. You also cross-questioned the person who read the paper. Then there might be a general discussion. We all had sardines on toast—which were known as "the whales." Then there would be a division, a point on which you disagreed and took sides, and your name was written in a book, specifying which side you had taken. Lately, various people have written books about the Apostles, but in those days it was completely secret.

INTERVIEWER

What did you do during the Second World War?

RYLANDS

Maynard Keynes had to go to the Treasury and take over as adviser in the financing of the country, and I took charge in college as bursar. We had an R.A.F. transport unit sharing the kitchens, dons and students from Queen Mary College, London, an American Unit, and various others, all staying in the college. There were seventy airmen who had to be fed and lodged. I had to manage affairs while others went to do more important things. I would have been perfectly useless as a soldier, whereas here I could do perhaps useful work. The country was of course bankrupt, and Keynes had to organize the money. He was a genius: now we hear about Keynesian economics, but then he was a pioneer. He also made the fortunes of King's College. From being one of the poorest colleges in Cambridge, it became one of the richest under his manage-

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ment. He did it by knowing how to manage money, which most economists don't. College money was under strict regulations, and most bursars were terrified of doing anything with it. Maynard wasn't, and by selling property and understanding the stock market he made us rich. He left the college one million pounds of his own money—which was a lot in 1946, though it isn't now. He also left us some very remarkable pictures—impressionists and post-impressionists—which he had bought on the advice of his Bloomsbury friends, such as Roger Fry, Duncan Grant and Vanessa Bell. They are on loan to the Fitzwilliam Museum. I remember during the war, when I was bursar, Keynes invited all the other college bursars to come and hear him talk about college finance, and how they should invest and what they should sell and what they should do. They all turned up, and he gave a most wonderful, eloquent exposition of what he had done for King's and the things which a poor college could do to become rich. I think they all totally ignored it! He was a dangerous man, Mr. Keynes!

INTERVIEWER

Going back to literature, you told me that one of your earliest memories was of Thomas Hardy. When did you meet him?

RYLANDS

I went to tea with him in 1926. Hardy was born in 1840, so that carries one back. He knew a lot of people who had been mixed up with the Napoleonic Wars—it comes up in "The Trumpet-Major" and other stories. He was living with his second wife, close to some relatives of mine in Dorset, and I wrote and asked if I could visit him while in the area. He had read something I had written and told me he liked it. He then talked about my great-grandfather, my great-uncles and aunts. For sixty years my great-grandfather was the rector of West Stafford, the next parish to Stinsford where Hardy is buried. Hardy told me that when he was a little boy he used to walk back from the Dorchester School to his cottage and on

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the way look in at the rectory kitchen and be given a cup of milk with biscuits. He was like a wise and gentle old village carpenter. He died a couple of years after my visit.

INTERVIEWER

How do you assess him as a novelist and poet?

RYLANDS

I have always adored him. I knew the novels early on, but got to know the poems later. I think he is a great poet, a wonderful poet, unlike anyone else, completely original. He tried his hand at everything and is very skillful in his meter and inventive in his language. He has wonderful irony, wonderful compassion, wonderful wit—oh, he is a marvelous poet!

INTERVIEWER

You were pretty well the exact contemporary of F.R. Leavis; how did you get on with him? I mean he was rather scathing about Hardy, as indeed he was about everyone except his own favorites.

RYLANDS

Leavis became a lecturer at almost the same time as I did. I got on fairly well with him, but I think his influence did harm to the study of English literature. As it often happens, his disciples did even more damage! I suppose you might say that St. Paul did harm to the Gospels. But his wife, Queenie, was an even bigger problem. Oh, she was difficult! She suffered from persecution mania which contaminated him as well.

INTERVIEWER

Why did he antagonize everyone?

RYLANDS

He said that everybody else was wrong and he alone was right! He was the only man in the whole world to understand D.H. Lawrence, Dickens, James, etc. As a teacher I would say to a student, "Try this book," say, *Hard Times*, *Middlemarch*,

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Sons and Lovers. While Leavis would give his opinion and you had to hold onto it and reject anything else. He was as dogmatic as a non-conformist preacher. Otherwise he was all right.

INTERVIEWER

His basic tenet, that literature has a moral basis and therefore has a civilizing effect, was correct—it is what we all believe—but his methods seem to have been almost totalitarian. To make his judgement so black and white as to state that Lawrence is great, but Hardy no good, is absurd.

RYLANDS

Perfectly idiotic! He had this preposterous idea that he had discovered Lawrence; but long before I met him I had read Lawrence's novels. He was almost inhuman—he didn't seem to care about music or painting or travel. There was something parochial and small-minded in his dogmatism.

INTERVIEWER

He seems to have had this almost Stalinist way of sneering at other critics and attacking them personally, which was rather undignified—one might say un-British!—and which enabled others to do the same. For example, when he gave his famous lecture about C.P. Snow, and said that he was an intellectual nullity and so on. It seems that literature didn't have a civilizing effect on *him*!

RYLANDS

Exactly! You simply can't go around sneering at colleagues—it's bad manners! On the other hand, Snow was a dear old fellow, extremely civilized and highly intelligent. He also happened to be a rather good scientist. But Leavis hated him because he wrote novels which were not very good but became extremely popular, and as a result Snow became a kind of power in the land.

INTERVIEWER

Snow's novels are at least written in readable English, while

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Leavis wrote badly for someone who set such exacting standards for others; he has a dull and convoluted style.

RYLANDS

Yes, I'm afraid you're right—he couldn't write. But he was passionate about literature and conveyed it to others. That was his positive side. I got on well with him, although he hated my tutor, F.L. Lucas, most vehemently. Perhaps because Lucas was an exceptional classical scholar and wrote beautifully about literature, but his views were totally opposed to Leavis's. E.M. Forster gave some famous lectures, for example *Aspects of the Novel*. He made them open to the public and not just to university people. They were delightful and a great success. Queenie and Frank Leavis condemned them outright, because they were amusing, sensitive, and "popular," and therefore not serious! Perfectly silly!

INTERVIEWER

Speaking of Forster, who lived here in King's, was he a friend of yours? How do you rank him as a novelist?

RYLANDS

I think *A Passage to India* is a great book and *Where Angels Fear to Tread* a very good novel. *A Room with a View* is certainly better than I once thought. It is even better as a film! I went back to the novel after seeing the recent Merchant-Ivory film of it. Ismail Merchant came to lunch with me the other day and I told him how good his film is. But I do not care for *Howards End*—it is an interesting failure, as is *The Longest Journey*. My favorite Forster is his essays—his beliefs and appreciations of writers. *Abinger Harvest*, *Two Cheers for Democracy*, and of course *Aspects of the Novel*. They show the real man and are wonderful.

INTERVIEWER

What about *Maurice*? After I read it I felt sorry for his sad life—that even when homosexuality had become acceptable he didn't seem to have enjoyed himself! But I thought it was

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perhaps a mistake to publish it. And now Merchant and Ivory have filmed it as well. What do you think?

RYLANDS

I agree with you. I don't think he should have published it. It is a calamity the way everything is unearthed and published these days! But Forster did have a sad life and suffered. It was a bad age for all that. He didn't really benefit from sexual liberalization because he belonged to an earlier age. On the other hand, the years he lived in college were happy. He had a number of friends and was a sort of sage, surrounded by admiration and affection. I didn't know him well before then, though he used to come up to King's from time to time. When his mother died he had nowhere to go, so we said you'd better come and live in King's, and we made him a supernumerary fellow and later an honorary fellow. Then I saw him regularly and talked to him.

INTERVIEWER

T.E. Lawrence was a friend of Forster's. Did you ever meet him?

RYLANDS

No. But he came up to see Morgan from time to time and brought him one of the first copies of his *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. Forster was twenty years older than I, and he was out in the world and a famous novelist. His closest friend was G. Lowes Dickinson, who was a great influence on all of us. You didn't know Dickinson? Ah, he was the wisest and most sensitive of men! He wrote *The Greek View of Life* and *A Modern Symposium*. Morgan was imbued with Dickinson's gospel of life and all his values, which were the values of this college. King's in those days was different from all other colleges; it was known in the twenties and thirties for being individual and free in thought, speech and conduct. Dickinson wrote a book called *The International Anarchy*, about the horrors of the First World War, and how everything should be done to avoid war happening ever again. He became a passionate advocate

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of the League of Nations, which later became the United Nations. When he saw that it didn't work he was heartbroken and died in despair. Morgan wrote his biography. But if you want to know what King's was like in the early decades of this century, his are the books to read.

INTERVIEWER

Forster was happier once he moved into King's. He also seems to have had a regular companion, a policeman, I believe?

RYLANDS

Oh, *that* dear fellow! Yes, he has just sold Morgan's letters. They were great friends. His name was Bob Buckingham, I think, and he was probably bisexual, because he married and Morgan was very fond of his wife too. He used to go and stay with them. Some people thought it strange, but I don't think so—you can be deeply devoted to anybody, child, grandfather, wife. . . .

INTERVIEWER

You have not made a secret of your own homosexuality; how did you cope with it before what you call sexual liberalization?

RYLANDS

I think homosexuality is a misfortune. But fifty years ago it was also a cause for apprehension, fear. My closest and happiest friendships have always been with women.

INTERVIEWER

If you were Leavis and wished to compile your own *Great Tradition*, who would you pick out—apart from Shakespeare?

RYLANDS

I am especially keen on Milton and Pope. I am also fond of the neo-Classics—Dryden, Samuel Johnson. And of course all the Romantics: Keats, Shelley, Coleridge, Wordsworth and above all Byron. I became frightfully keen on G.M. Hopkins

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when I first discovered him in the twenties. As a lecturer I have had to read most things one way or another. I was very interested in George Eliot as a novelist.

INTERVIEWER

What about T.S. Eliot? As you said, he was instrumental in getting your own poems published. . . .

RYLANDS

Ah, he was very good to me, dear Tom! I was a great admirer of his criticism when I was an undergraduate, having read *The Sacred Wood* and been bowled over by it. I also liked his poetry. He gave me permission to direct his *Family Reunion*. That was the second time it was done. The first time it had been done in London in a rather churchy, over-serious way, and it hadn't been a great success. When I did it here with undergraduates he came to see it and liked it enormously. He was delighted that everybody laughed at all the jokes. I was not wild about *The Cocktail Party*, but I think *Murder in the Cathedral* is a wonderful play. I also did, over and over again, recitals of the *Four Quartets*, with Peggy Ashcroft, C. Day Lewis and his actress wife, Jill Balcon, Irene Worth and others, with a string quartet in the middle. We presented it in Liverpool Cathedral, the Purcell Room, the Festival Hall in London, and other places.

INTERVIEWER

Another contemporary was Evelyn Waugh. Did you ever meet him?

RYLANDS

Only once or twice when I was staying with Maurice Bowra at Oxford. Theirs was the great Oxford world, a different crowd from mine. Day Lewis, Louis MacNeice, John Betjeman, Evelyn Waugh, Auden . . . I got to know Cecil Day Lewis better than the rest through Ros [Rosamond Lehmann]. As you know he was her great love for ten years, but he left her to marry Jill Balcon, which broke her heart.

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INTERVIEWER

Now that you no longer teach, what do you do mostly—apart from seeing friends and traveling around England for the purpose?

RYLANDS

I have been responsible for the Arts Theatre, as I said, for fifty years. Until 1960 I directed most of the Shakespeare plays, with people like Ian McKellen, John Barton, Peter Hall, etc. . . . I didn't know that they would go up the ladder like that while I would be staying down below *holding* the ladder! The other day we did a show to raise money for our appeal to save the theater. It was our Golden Jubilee at the Arts Theatre, and I had twenty-three *stars* appearing, led by Peggy Ashcroft. Darling John Gielgud was involved in filming and couldn't come, but all the others came. I arranged a recital about Cambridge and Shakespeare. Richard Baker was *compère.*

INTERVIEWER

And now you have just received your C.H.—the Companion of Honour from the Queen. I believe it is one of the most prestigious titles, far above a Knighthood, being a personal gift of her Majesty's. Did you spend ten minutes with her alone?

RYLANDS

Oh yes. And she was marvelous, very knowledgeable. We spoke about Shakespeare, of course, in particular Othello, and what exactly was the Moor, and "trouble in Cyprus," which elicited the remark "Things haven't changed much!"

INTERVIEWER

What are your plans for the future?

RYLANDS

My dear girl, at eighty-five there isn't much future left! But you never know!

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INTERVIEWER

Do you believe in an afterlife, as your friend Rosamond Lehmann does?

RYLANDS

Good gracious no! Not a single word of it! When Ros talks about it I say, "I can't think what it would be like except that I shouldn't like it at all!" She says, "I *know* there is something after death." Of course she is in touch with her dear, darling daughter, Sally, who died in 1953, and who is up there, playing the piano perhaps, and waiting for her to arrive! She believes in it totally, but I don't at all.

INTERVIEWER

So you believe that death is really the end, even if there is a God?

RYLANDS

If He exists what He allows to happen among human beings is very discreditable. If He created them the way they now behave to each other, it is worse than diabolical. In the Victorian Age, some people thought that the world would get better and better. Then we had the War of 1870, the Boer War, the War of 1914–1918, and finally the last war. One can't say that it is a *good* world, or getting better, or that human beings are *good*, except one's own friends, who are, of course, special.

INTERVIEWER

Do you find that the young are gloomy, because of the threat of nuclear war and the violence in the world?

RYLANDS

No. They don't appear to be gloomy. They seem to me to be going on doing their own things; they all can play a musical instrument, or act, or play games; they have love affairs—which is easier now than in the old days. At the college we now

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have two hundred boys and one hundred girls—it must be very nice for the boys.

INTERVIEWER

And for the girls! So you see, life goes on, and there is hope for the future!

RYLANDS

Thank God for that!

—**Shusha Guppy**

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James McMichael

Seven Poems

Left to itself, setting is the chance that
something good might happen. A highway runs the
length of the peninsula. The suburbs overlap.
She lived in one of them and took around with her
her setting. Shops and houses, luminous spring lawns,
streets that led off to places she'd speak French.
Unpunctured by the phrase "One evening" or "One
fine day,"
her setting promised it would yield the longed-for.
We met one evening at church, but the adjacent
back yards, the balm of their untold repository
waiting in the dark as, introduced, we
looked at one another, looked away. 1964,
November, but the earth, its different settings for
still other stories, its planes of lines extending and
reversible at any point. Saltflats. An abandoned
tinker's van in a swampy field. The wooded island
upstream from the bridge, the one down.

Nor was it even then too late. I was the
married, reliable sponsor to her youth group,
I had to keep it to myself. But what if she weren't
there again for a third straight week? I should
want her not to be there. Love meant wanting her to be
comely, prized and occupied, light-spirited, it meant
wanting her not to want me. Another Sunday and she
wasn't there. If I told her, would she want me then?
I couldn't tell her, couldn't not, and did.

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I wanted for her sake to undo it. With only
part of me and too late, I asked her to forget.
There wasn't time for us since I was married.
I'd made her want another time, when, whole,
impossibly together, we would rescue my avowal,
which was a curse. Though I asked her not to do it
she was waiting for that time and, by the tree where I
couldn't get away to meet her, waiting
undismayed, heartsick, eighteen.

Each time was a rehearsal for September 8th
when we'd say goodbye. We knew we'd write. We wrote
daily for a year. By thinking that on her way
south sometime to see her grandmother I'd have
two hours with her in Union Station, I held on.
My walk toward her from the car, her seeing me, her
face and how she'd feel against my chest. Of those
last minutes with her there would be a first, then others
after it, their series welling at my wrists and temples.
She'd let go of me, she'd turn to get her train and we'd
have lived it, we'd remember, it would have to be enough.
She wrote that she was changing schools. Should she be
four hundred miles away or only sixty?

In my stupid arithmetic, we were
outnumbered, she and I, by my wife and two sons.
She never asked me to leave them, never said she'd
leave me. We promised only that we'd meet next
week again at Vicki's or at Chuck's. The quick
assurances each time, we were fine, it had again been
less than too hard and here we were. Then always
rapture and protestation, doubt, self-doubt, and
lingering, the future we'd already lost
forever there for us in our clothes on the cold floor.

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Back with her family the second summer
she guided foreigners around the campus,
learned from the escort to an Argentine the little
training she would need to do his job.
Letters were her way to show us both that she could
stay busy, nothing in what she did too small to tell.
How she was doing she gauged by where it didn't
hurt her to go. To be somewhere we'd been and not be
hurt by it was to love me well, to be glad that it was
me she loved and not someone she could both
love and be with. Because she'd looked for me there
one Sunday when I didn't come, the quad was hard.
So was the amphitheater, the benches under the oaks.
After breakfast once she walked to Lagunita.
Past the rows of eucalyptus where she'd told me she'd
know me when I was seventy, she followed the
reeds at the west shore. The water was still.
She sat for a long time on an old railroad tie.
Everything about the morning was quiet and bright.

To get away from the house to see her
I'd kept pleading work. The library at school was
quieter, I'd said, the kids weren't there. It had served,
though they weren't troublesome or loud. Now, I sat them
next to one another, told them I was moving
away for awhile, that I was going to live
somewhere else. Nothing from Geoff, from Bobby
instantly a chuckle and smile.

"Are you happy? Why did you laugh?"

"Because now we won't bother you when you have
to write."

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Stickup

Susan Chace

It's been two days since the mugging.

The oval face of the mugger rises higher and bobs in what looks like moonlight. Only it's raining.

The knife at my throat curves ever so slightly. It is shinier than it could really have been. The voice, more gentle: "Excuse me. Don't scream. Just give me your pocketbook." Only the fingers stay true, the touch of a jazz player, shaky, but secure on his turf. In an instant, he has slipped the straps off my shoulder. My handbag hangs from his wrist.

I feel deep, dead-end shame. The way it is when a lover lies to you, and you both know it's a lie.

It's the same scene in my head running over and over: I keep passing in front of the red fire hydrant under the super's window. My paper bag of groceries is soggy, except where I hold it with both arms around it. It smells good. When I get back inside, I'm going to tell my family how to behave if and when I ever cook them dinner again. After that display tonight, they are lucky I decided only to go around the block . . .

"Excuse me. Don't scream."

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In my mind, I run like the wind and stay above interference.

In real life, I am flat-footed, and I follow instructions. "Turn around and walk. Don't look back."

Perhaps some history. I'm a thirty-seven-year-old journalist. Twice married. Three grown stepchildren. One new daughter, Addy, a tough kid, not at all the brooding beauty her brother Daniel is. Daniel's my son, now sixteen, originally lost in a custody case, lately returned to me with a message from his father, an eye doctor in Tucson: "Your son won't go to high school."

It was a victory, of course, to be handed Daniel back, ten years after the judge ruled he would live with his "stable" parent. But if the truth be told, it's been a time here this past month, complicated by the fact that the cause of turmoil is usually offstage. We don't see much of Daniel. He appears and disappears like the Cheshire cat. Even when he's in front of me, I get the feeling that I'm staring at what Gertrude Stein said about Oakland—there's no there there.

Case in point. The other night he showed up unexpectedly at the end of the bed. I usually know he's coming because his espadrilles squeak, but I must have been dreaming. Looking down from that halo of maroon-and-yellow hair, he said in his soft, spooky voice: "I need twenty dollars. Don't get up. Just point out your pocketbook." I did. "Thank you," he said and kissed me on the lips and was gone.

During the day, Daniel has a job as a messenger. He sleeps while we eat dinner. Then late at night he goes out dancing or into the living room and watches television—people like himself jumping out of windows or smashing through papier-mâché walls while holding on to guitars. It can be terrifying if you come upon it suddenly the way I do, around four in the morning. There's a kind of green glow in the living room at that hour. Daniel keeps the TV sound very low so as not to wake us, and that probably makes it stranger than it is. I mean, all that screaming in pantomime. And once there was Daniel's silhouette against the far wall, dancing and screaming back to the TV. No sound.

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Daniel thinks about noise. So do I. It's what I notice first. I still hear the moment my marriage to Daniel's father, Paul, ended. We were hanging a very large, square painting I had insisted on having. It's a picture of two high-back chairs, one with no legs, angled out toward the "horizon"—the point at which flat green ground meets a flat blue sky. The painting is called "Marriage," though I don't think Paul ever knew that. Anyway, I was holding one side of it, and my leg began to itch. I bent down to scratch and dropped my end of the painting. Paul screamed, a deafening curse I had never heard before. Only it wasn't a curse. It was my name.

I met Mark some years after that. He had had a full life already. So Daniel wasn't really news to him, or the custody case, or the institution for the mentally ill: "A long night ride on a stationary bicycle is what it sounds like," he said, sympathetically.

It was true we were worlds apart in that Mark liked to get up in the morning, and he didn't like white wine for breakfast. But, as it happened, the week before I met him, my shrink had introduced me to the notion of cooperation. I bit down hard, and I've been cooperating ever since. I even switched to business reporting to curb ungovernable urges. (Not even I get interested in a man if he talks about things like return on his equity.) Most of the time I hate cooperating, which seems to boil down to saying no to myself every time I want to say yes. There are often times I long for a little intrigue, some small debauchery, a good lie. Venial sin is what I'm into. I miss that flush on the cheeks, rising without warning—that old-time stirring, when I'd blush to see a lover seeing me, in a place where nothing could take place. (You may wonder how I know that's a venial sin. In high school we had a retreat priest who could actually measure desire.) Other times I long for the measure of the mythical tribe whose people had one of everything—one mate, one dog, one cat, one child. Each adult made love once in a lifetime, thinking about it a long time before, and remembering it for a long time afterwards.

It's interesting, these fused families: they work—I mean,

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the disintegration is minimal—but they don't count for much.

Case in point: There is a huge desk in our apartment that belonged to Mark during his first marriage. It's one of the things he mentions that have to be dealt with when he dies (any time soon, he warns us frequently). He can't figure out how to get it out of the building. He doesn't trust the movers, because the last time his desk was badly nicked. But he has to find a way to get it out when he's gone because it's "got to go to someone in the family." Family to Mark always means blood.

Here's the curve ball. Mark adores Daniel. You can see it in both their eyes when they drink beer and play each other music. Addy adores Daniel. She won't let anyone take off her T-shirt that says "Tucsonette" on it. "Me and Daniel," she says. She wants to be a boy when she grows up so she can wear earrings and makeup like Daniel does. Actually that's my makeup he's putting on before he goes out to those clubs.

I'm the only one with reservations. I'm the only one who wants to beat up Daniel. For what? Staying up all night? Children don't take after strangers, after all. And look at him. He's a heartbreaker, my Daniel. Two packs of cigarettes gone in the night. Bloody bitten fingertips holding my hand when I shake him awake for work. "He's a smart kid, a little lost" is what Mark says.

"He's a vegetarian who hates vegetables. That's suicide" is what I say.

Food has become a big issue in this family since Daniel's arrived. Food and sleep. All of a sudden both are elusive. Addy hears me get up to look at Daniel, maybe. Anyway, she's started sleepwalking. Sometimes she wakes up Mark and asks him to fix her some bacon. It drives him crazy because he can't get back to sleep. If he doesn't sleep, he can't eat, and that's probably why I got mugged. I mean, if I hadn't blown up because nobody wanted my dinner, none of this would have happened.

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It's Daniel who comes with me to the police station. Mark cooks eggs for Addy. Looking at the books in the precinct captain's office, I see the same moon-shadow face in every other picture, though I know in the calculating part of my mind that no two of the photographs look alike.

"Mom, some of these people are white and some are black," Daniel says, when I can't eliminate anyone.

"They are all have-nots, Daniel. I'm a have." (Am I really such an idiot?) Daniel's coat stinks of cigarettes. I wish I still smoked.

The moonface swells in my sleep and explodes like a gum bubble when Daniel turns his key in the door. He went dancing after we left the police station. It must be close to daybreak by now. I'm not even sure it's Daniel coming home. Maybe it's the mugger. He would have keys too now. The mugger/Daniel is stumbling. A heavy plastic glass falls onto the bathroom tile floor.

I stand up in the bathroom light for a long time. Then I go to sleep with Addy. The bed creaks when I climb over her. I put her Sesame Street record back on, a song called "I Love Trash." It's a waltz. Addy cries a little and puts her thumb in her mouth. "Hello, my special-special," I say and work my arms around her. She is smaller than a grocery bag.

In the morning she rolls over on my head. "Excuse me," she says in high-tone two-year-old: "Did you sleep well?"

The day is bright and hot. Perfectly clear. A man telephones. His name is Howie Duggan, he says, and he has found my pocketbook in a trash can on Amsterdam and 74th Street, close to where we both live. He has taken it to where he works, in a locksmith shop on East 17th Street. "Thank you, Howie," I say, and dial the police, who want to meet "this Duggan guy."

Officer Ocotillo picks me up in front of the fire hydrant. We take the FDR drive. "So now you are an official New Yorker," he says. Howie Duggan isn't around. He has left a cardboard container for me, the kind that holds beer and hot dogs at ball games. It says "Howei" on it. In this container, there is my checkbook, my date book, my reporter's notebook, my loose-

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leaf address book. I write a note to "Howei," thanking him and promising to send a reward.

At home, I lay paper towels on the dining-room table and spread out the pages of my address book. A watery blue blur of faces rises. The rain in the trash can has washed my sources and my contacts and my friends all together. Some of the names that haven't washed out I don't recognize. Who is Myrna Schultz?

Leo Crow's name is still there, even though he's dead. He was the building's old super, and he was a bully. He took his motorboat out on the lake one night when he was drunk. He never wore a life preserver. The boat turned over. Leo couldn't swim.

Names written in pencil are still easy to read: The IBM Product Center.

I find Robert Lowell's "Epilogue" stuck to a page in my checkbook. It's the poem that ends: "We are poor passing facts, warned by that to give each figure in the photograph its living name." I guess I like it so much because it's sort of a reporter's credo, or an ideal, maybe. I mean, you can't ever reach it. "Pray for the grace of accuracy," Lowell advised.

When Jean Stafford, Lowell's first wife, got so sick she couldn't talk, she tried to get an interviewer to understand that she alone *knew* the story behind every word Lowell wrote. Does it make a difference if you know or not if you can't tell what you know?

I told that Arizona judge I knew Daniel, but through and through, the way a tree knows its leaves. I couldn't convince him. Daniel and I were still one body then, it seemed to me, even though he was already six years old.

But that's all water over the dam, so to speak. He's here now. With me. And every gesture is something out of a Magritte—detached, sudden—and solid with warning, possibly clairvoyant and possibly not.

Like when he fingered my shoulder before I stormed out into the rain: "You're not going to leave us, are you?" he said.

I guess they don't announce it these days, I mean they don't actually say the words "This is a stickup."

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Two Poems by Henri Cole

West Point Remembered

Such is the way with monumental things:
to make us see and wonder.
The unreserved calm of the place
made us marvel at the world's problems.
Across the post office lawn
cadets gathered in twos and threes,
each man with trousers pressed
and six gilded buttons riveted
in a field of grey. They greeted each
other with perfect Victorian courtesy,
and one with his head cocked in daydream,
cap pushed back at a boyish slant,
a yellow letter unfolded and waving
in his hand, asked himself,
as any one of us might,
"What do the words mean?"
The little tattoos of blue ink
ran across his page, a river
of pewter-bright clarity,
yet clarifying only the silence
he felt as he looked past us
toward the real river, a fishy, neglected,
luminous streak of blue, gull-raked,
and running wide as the Hudson's base?
Not one of us, as I recall, could deny
the difficult note he heard.
To listen more than one speaks
is a gift despite its little miseries,
and what the cadet from his citadel
heard comes seldom in a life.

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His nation like a Parthenon
seemed risen where even the miracle
of scruffy house-wrens find their lungs
fire-branded by the thin air.
And all afterwards that color-peak weekend,
our windshield carried with it
a dim sepia print of this scene
as though rendering the letter's dispatch.
A hunk of scarlet foliage
electrified all around us
as we coasted down the new mown meadow
to spend the day cheering
a corps of plebes in their pickup scrimmage,
our thermos filling us
with its creamy, sedating gold
as the ageless players
clipped one another like silver knives
with such force and skill it seemed they
cut loose the very detritus of our lives.

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Vanessa

It was premonitions that kept us restless
the night before, visions of a gemlike lagoon
we'd push off into, the slim canoe
quivering like a magnetic needle through
narrow reefs of sedges. It was enough
to keep us fired: paddling away from
camp on marshland towards a lion's mouth of river.
At night mosquitoes, parading high-toned
outside the net, kept us captives.
Fireflies winked about the radius of our tent.
Weakened by island heat to visceral fatigue,
we slept inert as prisms in the dark night.
Tide was in when we waded into the idle current.
In a scorpion's spinal curve, it would tow us miles
into the ocean's briny green-white surf.
A dozen thirsty frogs watched beneath the oozy rim.
It seemed we could have been barbarians
plundering their defenseless world.
One foot on board, set to kick off our
bright aluminum canoe, for a split second,
I caught sight of the lagoon's woolly undercarpet
of iridescent algae. A small green ball blossomed
into a giant feeding anemone, a family
of centimeter snails nibbling its tentacle tips.
All sorts of plankton wafted about
in a rich paisley of debris that must have been home.
They were a rainbow of sea-travellers:
helmeted red abalones, feather boas
and a lazy hermit crab sailing on a starfish.
They metamorphosed before my eyes, and quickly
as it rose, their colony blurred
beneath a wavy thicket of surfgrass.

The virgin wilderness,
its isometric shores

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passing alongside us,
absorbs its conquerors

with evolutionary
good sense. Minnowlike fish,
with fiery lateral fins,
streaked beneath us.

Not an utterance rose
from the belly of marsh,
save the oars' oaken
dorsal fins. The sun arched

across the bow. Little
streams of sweat trickled
down my brow. Elsewhere
such paradisal

beauty might have sealed one's
faith in Creation,
but the world spun
with such saturnalian

power, there was only
each other to lean on.
Even the proud hairy
tarantula longed,

like Demeter, for her baby,
and the water moccasin
coiled with his marbled mate.
In my slender stern,

I felt the world swim past,
and at high noon and later,
bit-by-bit, our intensely flat
descent into its core.

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Feet dipped overboard, straw hats tipped back,
peanut butter
crackers eaten, we drifted beyond the island nucleus
in view of the Atlantic's far vanishing point. A muddy

low tide exposed whole cities of mussels
and clams cemented against the channel floor.
Sunning, they seemed short of breath, squirting spoonfuls

of sea into the air. Sweeping nearer, our silver
hull scraped against the river chasm, and we paddled off
to safety.
When a meteoric pressure surged beneath us, a white-cap

rolling in our wake, I braced my sneakers into the chassis.
Air froze in my pelvis, dots of sunlight squiggled
before me,
and a scaly tourmaline fin surfaced, eeling in weed-

choked circlets giant as a sea-turtle.
The saw-toothed jaw was snapping underwater
when the lizard-tail hurtled

through the surface. Almost ten feet of spine curled
across the canoe rim in a perfect teardrop
of leathery skin. Gear swept overboard as our gunnels

swamped beneath us, the mind's shutter fixing one
telescopic
frame in memory: the reptile, grazing my calf in the panic,
left a trail of murky, underbelly silt before dropping

back into the sea without me.
And something in its cool, ethereal feel
reminded me, in spite of peril
of capsizing, of a moment years before
when once in the half-sleep of dawn

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my sister came to my bed. I remember
it only faintly, so faintly that I have
thought, perhaps, it was only the wide net
of our dreams that wed, as children
themselves sometimes do early on to mirror
the world, and the wall our pillows abutted
the channel for our union. At moments her shape
above me was opaque as a Vanessa butterfly's
painted wings, at others I saw clear
through her to the wooded landscape beyond.
But when our tenderness had ended,
something in my impalpable recall,
unfixed or godlike, left the same
membranous residue on our adolescence
as the reptile's flailing oily tail,
and it was this isolated synapse, framing
primal images of fear and childlike
love, that steadied our canoe and kept us rowing.

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Two Poems by Sharon Olds

Lament

Finally someone just drops it and breaks it
like a mercy killing, the cow butter dish,
it cracks easily into five pieces,
opening like an earthenware flower on the floor:
a crescent of furrowed terracotta, a
dry cold bisque side, a
rogue shard, the cow herself broken
free, upside-down, hollow—
muscular inner curves of her body,
slim elliptical hole of her throat leading
into the darkness inside her head.
Long, drawn-out ending of my motherhood,
these kids I see less and less—
better to smash some china like the end of a
love-affair. I take her in my hand,
convex flanks fitting my palm,
thumb and forefinger holding her neck at the
carotids, kiss her mild
dumb forehead, look into her empty
shape smooth and chambered as a woman's sex,
the way God might have sat on the bank
first shaping the clay.
Even on the hottest day if you
soaked her in cold water in the morning and
set her on the dish she would keep the butter
cool till night in the dark of her body,
fresh, and soft.

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The Protestor

for Bob Stein

We were driving north, through the snow, you said
you'd turned 21 during Vietnam, you were
1-A. The road curved
and curved back, the branches laden, you
said you'd decided not to go
to Canada. Which meant you'd decided to
go to jail, a slender guy of
21, which meant you'd decided to be
raped rather than to kill, if it was their
life or your ass, it was your ass.
We drove in silence, such soft snow
so heavy borne-down. That was how I'd come to
know I loved America—
when the men had to leave, they could never come back,
I looked and loved every American
needle on every American tree,
my soul was in it. But if I were taken and
used, taken and used, I think
my soul would die, I think I'd be easily broken,
the work of my life over. And you'd said
This is the work of my life, to say with my
body itself You fuckers you cannot
tell me who to kill. As if there were a
spirit free of the body, safe from it.
After a while you talked about your family,
not starting, as I had, with
lover and kids, leaving everyone else out—
you started with your grandparents
and worked your way back, away from yourself,
deeper and deeper into Europe, the Torah
buried sometimes in the garden, sometimes
swallowed and carried in the ark of the body itself.

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Three Poems by Claribel Alegria

Summing Up

In the sixty-three years
I have lived
some instants are electric:
the happiness of my feet
jumping puddles
six hours in Macchu Picchu
the buzzing of the telephone
while awaiting my mother's death
the ten minutes it took
to lose my virginity
the hoarse voice
announcing the assassination
of Archbishop Romero
fifteen minutes in Delft
the first wail of my daughter
I don't know how many years yearning
for the liberation of my people
certain immortal deaths
the eyes of that starving child
your eyes bathing me in love
one forget-me-not afternoon
and on this rainy afternoon
the desire to mold myself
into a verse
a cry
a fleck of foam.

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Little Cambray Tamales

(makes 5,000,000 little tamales)
—for Eduardo and Helena who asked me
for a Salvadoran recipe

Two pounds of mestizo cornmeal
half a pound of loin of *gachupin*
cooked and finely chopped
a box of pious raisins
two tablespoons of Malinche milk
one cup of enraged water
a fry of conquistador helmets
three Jesuit onions
a small bag of multinational gold
two dragon's teeth
one presidential carrot
two tablespoons of pimps
lard of Panchimalco Indians
two ministerial tomatoes
a half cup of television sugar
two drops of volcanic lava
seven leaves of *pito*
(don't be dirty-minded, it's a soporific)
put everything to boil
over a slow fire
for five hundred years
and you'll see how tasty it is.

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Documentary

Come, be my camera.
Let's photograph the ant heap
the queen ant
extruding sacks of coffee,
my country.
It's the harvest.
Focus on the sleeping family
cluttering the ditch.
Now, among trees:
rapid,
dark-skinned fingers
stained with honey.
Shift to a long shot:
the file of ant men
trudging down the ravine
with sacks of coffee.
A contrast:
girls in colored skirts
laugh and chatter,
filling their baskets
with berries.
Focus down.
A close-up of the pregnant mother
dozing in the hammock.
Hard focus on the flies
spattering her face.
Cut.
The terrace of polished mosaics
protected from the sun.
Maids in white aprons
nourish the ladies
who play canasta,

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celebrate invasions
and feel sorry for Cuba.
Izalco sleeps
beneath the volcano's eye.
A subterranean growl
makes the village tremble.
Trucks and ox-carts
laden with sacks
screech down the slopes.
Besides coffee
they plant angels
in my country.
A chorus of children
and women
with the small white coffin
moves politely aside
as the harvest passes by.
The riverside women,
naked to the waist,
wash clothing.
The truck drivers
exchange jocular obscenities
for insults.
In Panchimalco,
waiting for the ox-cart to pass by,
a peasant
with hands bound behind him
by the thumbs
and his escort of soldiers
blinks at the plane:
a huge bee
bulging with coffee growers
and tourists.
The truck stops in the market place.

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A panorama of iguanas,
chickens,
strips of meat,
wicker baskets,
piles of *nances*,
nísperos,
oranges,
zunzas,
zapotes,
cheeses,
bananas,
dogs, *pupusas, jocotes,*
acrid odors,
taffy candies,
urine puddles, tamarinds.
The virginal coffee
dances in the millhouse.
They strip her,
rape her,
lay her out on the patio
to doze in the sun.
The dark storage sheds
glimmer.
The golden coffee
sparkles with malaria,
blood,
illiteracy,
tuberculosis,
misery.
A truck roars
out of the warehouse.
It bellows uphill
drowning out the lesson:

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A for alcoholism,
B for batallions,
C for corruption,
D for dictatorship,
E for exploitation,
F for the feudal power
of fourteen families
and etcetera, etcetera, etcetera.
My etcetera country,
my wounded country,
my child,
my tears,
my obsession.

—translated from the Spanish
by the author and Darwin T. Flakoll

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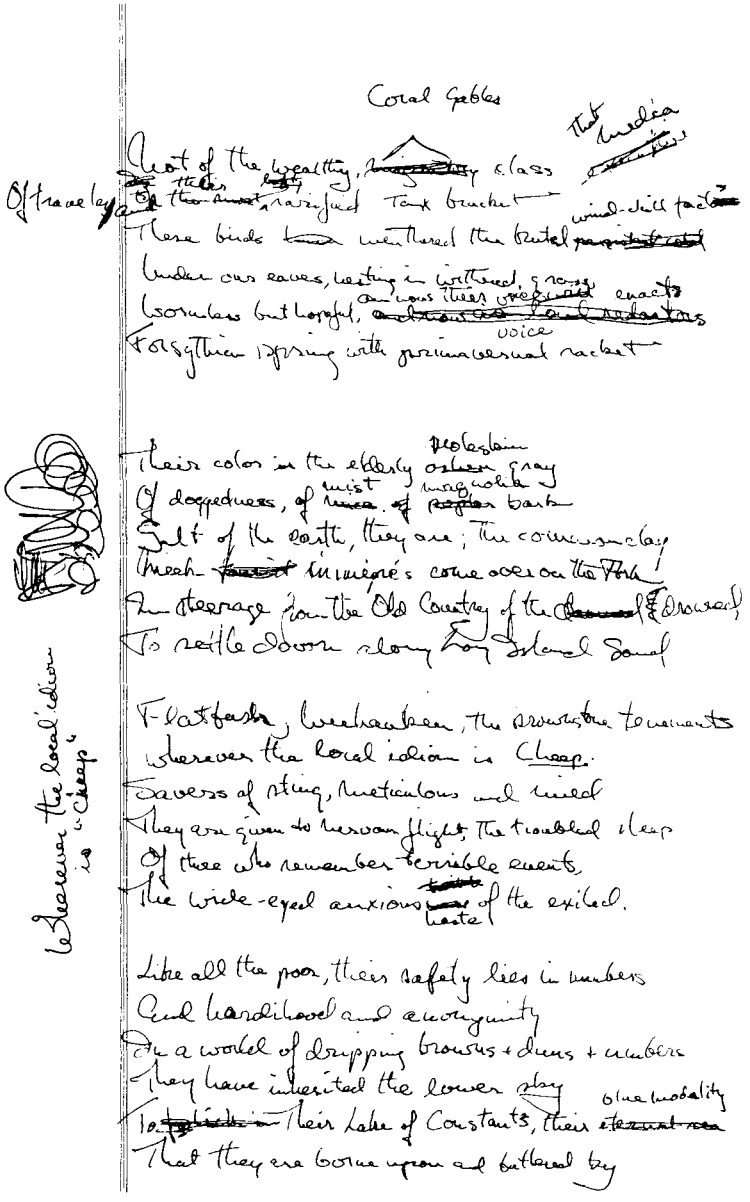

A manuscript page exhibiting his "quill-pen-and-inkwell method" from an early draft of Anthony Hecht's poem "Coral Gables."

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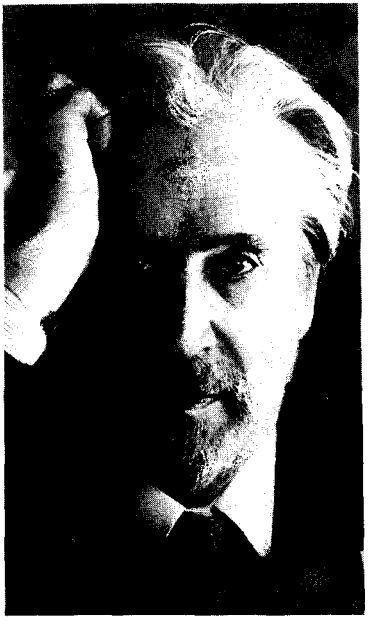

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The Art of Poetry XXXX
Anthony Hecht

Anthony Hecht is an aristocrat among poets. It's not that his work stands apart from others', but that his poems hold themselves to a high standard, and in their purposes and sympathies is a natural nobility: important matters dealt with in a manner that is contained, dignified, open, full of feeling; life viewed from the vantage of spirit. He even looks the part. With his solid build and sad eyes, his heraldic gray hair and pointed beard, he resembles a benevolent Shakespearean duke. The lofty rhetorical grace of his work also brings to mind another, finer age. But just beneath their elegant surfaces his

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poems often manifest an unnerving, nearly Jacobean intensity, by means of which he explores the baffled suffering of human history and the helpless isolation of the private life. He has not written as much as some of his contemporaries, but because of their intellectual power and emotional generosity more of his poems are memorable – indeed, now a permanent part of modern literature, and of the imagination of his readers.

He was born in New York City on January 16, 1923, the son of a stockbroker. He graduated from Bard College in 1944, later studied at Kenyon, and took an M.A. from Columbia in 1950; but between those hitches in school he served in the army, from 1943 until 1946, in France, Germany, Czechoslovakia, and eight months of occupation duty in Japan. His first book of poems, A Summoning of Stones, *appeared in 1954. His second,* The Hard Hours, *was not published until 1967, and was awarded the Pulitzer Prize. Two more volumes appeared in the next decade,* Millions of Strange Shadows *in 1977 and* The Venetian Vespers *in 1979. With Helen Bacon he has translated Aeschylus's* Seven Against Thebes *(1973), and with John Hollander he edited* Jiggery-Pokery *(1967), a collection by several poets of witty double dactyls (a form Hecht invented). A gathering of his essays,* Obbligati, *was published in 1986. He has received fellowships from the Guggenheim, Ford, and Rockefeller Foundations as well as the Prix de Rome in 1950 and the Bollingen Prize in 1983. He was elected to the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters in 1970, and the next year was named a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets. He was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1975, and has received honorary degrees from Bard and the University of Rochester. He has taught at Bard, Smith, for eighteen years at Rochester, and since 1985 has been Professor of English at Georgetown University. From 1982 until 1984 he served as Consultant in Poetry at the Library of Congress.*

He lives with his second wife, Helen (the author of several renowned cookbooks), and their teenage son Evan in a handsome, white-painted brick house in a comfortable section of Washington, near the Japanese embassy. Settled into over-

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sized wicker chairs, we spoke on an enclosed porch just off the living room, with its grand piano and a wall of prints by Samuel Palmer, Braque, Rouault, and Matisse. The poet works upstairs. There is a reading room there, with bookcases of poetry and literary criticism dwindling into nonfiction, and across the hallway Hecht's study. On his desk is a bronze bust of himself in 1954, the work of Gilbert Franklin. Nearby are photographs of Marianne Moore, Joseph Brodsky, John Crowe Ransom, Mona Van Duyn standing at Keats's grave, and his wife and son. There are a lot of records and cassettes here too, an O.E.D., shelves of Shakespeare, an encyclopedia and bibles, books on travel, theology and art history. While he was showing me around, I was struck again by qualities I remembered from his poetry—an elaborate courtesy that is never stuffy, a formality that can break into broad humor or streetwise slang. Most striking of all is his voice—a plummy, resonant baritone that, to my ear, sounds like no one else so much as the actor Claude Rains.

INTERVIEWER

I remember being at a reading of yours some time back, and overhearing two people sitting behind me. "He's English, isn't he?" the one said to her neighbor. "No," the other replied, "he was born in Germany and then was forced to flee to England before the war." Obviously those two had been listening carefully—to your tones of voice, and to the subject of some of your poems. It's just the facts they got all wrong.

ANTHONY HECHT

I suppose my voice must sound affected in some way, though there is no "natural" diction or pronunciation into which I might relapse. I've heard my voice recorded, and by now I feel it sounds just like me. Doubtless it's a mask of some sort; a fear or shame of something, very likely of being Jewish, a matter I am no longer in the least ashamed of, though once it was a painful embarrassment. When my voice took on its present character I just can't say. But in high school—the Horace Mann School for Boys, in Riverdale, New York—I

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played the role of John Worthing in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and I worked hard at my speech for that play. I may add that Julian Beck, of the Living Theater, played Lady Bracknell in that production.

INTERVIEWER

Did you have any other famous schoolmates?

HECHT

Yes, Jack Kerouac was in my class. He won a football scholarship to Columbia, and broke his leg in freshman practice, which kept him out of the army later on, so that he joined the merchant marine, a service that gave him time to really read fiction for the first time. He was a gentle and kind fellow as I remember him, but at school it didn't seem as if we had much in common. Later, however, when the first American Prix de Rome in literature was to be awarded by the American Academy of Arts and Letters, Kerouac and I were apparently the leading contenders, each with his particular champion in the Academy. In my case it was Allen Tate, in Jack's it was Mark Van Doren. The committee finally settled on me as the recipient, and when Jack learned (that very evening, very likely) how the vote went, he called my parents' home to congratulate me. That was a noble and generous thing to do. I was abroad at the time, but he was, my parents wrote me, genial and sincere and a little high.

INTERVIEWER

So your manner of speech goes back to school days?

HECHT

At the very least. And I'm the more convinced that it served as a mask because in the old days, when I used to drink a lot, everyone remarked that my speech became more precise and fastidious the more I drank. I used to be pleased by this observation. I suppose I felt it meant I was giving nothing away.

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INTERVIEWER

Did you ever, back when, say to yourself, "A *poet*—that's what I want to be?"

HECHT

Oh, I said that quite early. I think I fell in love with poetry in my freshman year in college. My father was a businessman, and I knew I didn't want to be that, not because I knew anything about business, or his life—except that it had been miserable—but I was not *in love* with business, and I *was* with poetry. So I said, one weekend when I came home from school, that I was going to be a poet. It was an act of defiance, but I didn't think it would be taken very seriously. I thought they'd just humor me and say, by the time he grows up he'll change his mind, and so forth. But they were really terrified. So terrified that they decided they would persuade me to change my mind, and do so at once. They enlisted the help of Dr. Seuss, Theodore Geisel, who was a friend of theirs. He was invited to dinner the next time I came home from college. He lived in New York then, and was making political cartoons for *PM*, the newspaper, and also doing "Quick, Henry, the Flit" ads. He came to dinner, and I had no reason to suspect he was there for any sinister purpose until, at the end of dinner, we rose to leave the dining room and Ted put his arm around my shoulder and said, "Tony, what do you want to be when you grow up?" And I knew right away that something was up. So I said, I'm going to be a poet. And he said, "Fine, and I have some advice for you. I think the first thing you should do is to read the life of Joseph Pulitzer." Well, I didn't know anything about Pulitzer except that he was a newspaper publisher. But I knew instantly that Ted was trying to discourage me from becoming a poet, so I assumed there must be something in Pulitzer's life that was as threatening as it could possibly be. Whereupon I resolved never to read the life of Joseph Pulitzer, and I never have.

INTERVIEWER

Was it in college, then, that you began writing poems?

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HECHT

God knows when it all began, but long before then. The first thing for which I felt I had any natural aptitude was music. I had a quite good ear (not perfect but relative pitch), and a quite good auditory memory. I was able to recall a good deal of intricate classical music after a single hearing, and to pick out fugues and canons by ear on the piano.

INTERVIEWER

Was this a help to you as a poet?

HECHT

I thought so at the time I first began to write, though I am no longer so sure. At the very least, however, it gave me a strong sense of form. But as far as I can recall, the first things I wrote were doggerel verse.

INTERVIEWER

What prompted that? Surely not Bach or Mozart?

HECHT

No. I found that I had committed to memory not only a lot of classical music but the tunes and words of songs by Cole Porter and Noel Coward; and I greatly enjoyed the highly formal patterns of those lyrics, as well, of course, as their wit and charm. In fact, the wit and charm seemed to have a lot to do with the formal patterns.

INTERVIEWER

Did you try to compose songs yourself?

HECHT

No, not really. I never supposed I had any creative gifts as regards music; only that I was keenly attentive to it. But I found that I could also recall words if they appeared in a patterned order, and my interest in poems began there.

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INTERVIEWER

What was it that diverted you, if that's the right word, into "serious" poetry?

HECHT

Well, of course I knew that it existed. I was forced to read a great deal of it at school. Being afflicted with the particular kind of auditory memory that I have, I still retain ineradicably to this day long passages of Whittier's "Snow-Bound," and Bryant's "Thanatopsis," which I was required to memorize at school. I often wished that it had been Milton and Shakespeare rather than Whittier and Bryant that had been so permanently lodged in my head. But when, in due course, I came to try to write poems in iambic pentameter, my yardstick for measuring the length of line in my own ear was the first line of "Thanatopsis." "To him who in the love of Nature holds . . ." I would measure out my own lines against that one, not because I liked it especially, but because it was a certified, Bureau of Weights and Measures Standard Iambic Pentameter Line.

INTERVIEWER

There's a melancholy that, it seems to me, cuts two ways in your poems. One is the melancholy tone of your meditations on historical violence—not just seriousness, but a bitter helplessness. The other way cuts closer to home. It's what I see in poems of an autobiographical cast—"Apprehensions," say, or "A Hill"—where bits of your early life are used to reveal a dark, abiding sadness. Is that, in fact, the way you remember your childhood?

HECHT

Yes, it *is* the way I remember childhood. This is something I must be cautious about, because my childhood was comparatively privileged. And it's possible that part of the motive behind the writing of the, as you call them, poems of meditation on historical violence, was a little homilitic warning to myself

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against cheap feelings of self-pity. One poem in which the two aspects are brought into immediate contact is "Behold the Lilies of the Field." But the fact is that while my childhood was privileged, it was profoundly insecure, partly due to a child's uninformed and ungoverned fantasies about the consequences of the Depression. But for many other reasons as well. The word "symbiosis" has enjoyed a certain vogue recently, and as a child I would have had no idea what it meant, and in all likelihood had never heard of it. But some instinct in which I had complete trust told me that the interrelationships and interdependencies of my immediate family were draining and dangerous to me. I was not free to be myself—though of course I hadn't the faintest notion of what I would be if I were free. I wanted to be an adult, not for the pleasures of adulthood (whatever they were—the only one that appealed to me in those days was the right to stay up late) but to be at last exempted from the routine and humiliating scrutiny of my elders (including my teachers), by whom I was inevitably weighed and found wanting. And a child who is told he is not good at anything is likely sooner or later to give in to a mood of defeat. And this was pretty much the situation in which I found myself; parental dissatisfaction was a kind of tyranny, developed to encourage the symbiotic relationship, though I scarcely could have known this at the time.

INTERVIEWER

You mean you were not encouraged in any undertaking?

HECHT

I was encouraged to be mediocre. When I was quite young, I developed a fierce interest in music and started to teach myself the piano; my mother then lost all interest in music, and quit playing. When my brother and I started to write poetry, she stopped reading poetry abruptly, and firmly declared she "couldn't understand" anything written by either of us. At one point my parents exhibited such despondency and doubt about my ability to do anything whatsoever that they spent a large sum of money to have me tested at the Pratt

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Institute. The test took several days, and I hated it because it was just one more ordeal of scrutiny and evaluation that was likely to humiliate me. Finally it was over, and then the results came in. I was told nothing, and was tormented between a desire to know and a fear of knowing. At last, aware that a lot of money had been invested in this test, I forced myself to ask my mother about it, and was told in a tone of mild regret and resignation that the aptitude tests indicated that I had no aptitudes whatever. As the evidence continued to pile up on all sides it became increasingly difficult to attain any confidence in myself; and I wanted alternately to be dead or to be "old," which meant to me, in either case, no longer under the scrutiny of authorities I was powerless to combat. So the "sadness" you speak of in the poems is the matured and mellowed residue of what in childhood had been a poisonous brew of fear, hatred, self-loathing, impotence and deep discouragement.

INTERVIEWER

I wonder if those were the same feelings you had in the Army?

HECHT

No. The army experience, while hateful, was entirely different. Like many another's, my undergraduate years were interrupted by the war, and I left what were unquestionably the happiest years of my life up to that time to enter infantry basic training. I had been able to join a special program, A.S.T.P.—the Army Specialized Training Program—by taking special courses during my last year in college, mostly math, in preparation for what was to be specialized, i.e., *non-infantry*, duty, though infantry basic was required first. I brought with me into the service, along with my toilet articles and the few things we were instructed to bring, a little set of paperbacks: Shakespeare plays and an anthology of English and American poetry. They were talismans of a sort; they symbolized sanity and joy; they were the lovely inventions of admirable minds, and they were moreover meant to remind me of the happy place where I first encountered them. They were *not* meant

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to serve as pseudo-Victorian "consolations" for anticipated hours of distress. The distress was certainly expected, but literature, in my experience, does not console, and isn't meant to; and I seemed to have believed that even then. Those texts were instead goals of a sort; realms of coherence and happiness. At the critical moment it turned out that they failed me completely. Anyone who's been through infantry basic in wartime will understand that there is little in the way of leisure or energy for the reading of literature. Accordingly, it is not surprising that along about the third week, when I found myself unexpectedly gifted with an off-duty afternoon, dug my books out of my foot-locker, and started to read some texts I all but knew by heart, they had that day all the vitality and impact of a random page of the Oswego telephone directory. I read and reread, with mounting terror, those lyrics and speeches that had enthralled me only a month before—and it was as if I had been lobotomized. My mind was gone, or completely numbed. I tried twice during the following weeks, with the same heartbreaking results. I put the books away, and never looked at them again during the entire time I spent in the army.

INTERVIEWER

That sounds like a very distressing experience.

HECHT

It was traumatic. The only way I was able to keep up my spirits during basic was the hope, based on A.S.T.P., that once basic was over (thirteen weeks of the summer in Alabama) I would be sent to some college or university for training in "intelligence" work. And this did happen; I was sent to Carleton College, in Northfield, Minnesota, to study German language and history, and European geography. The program was to take twenty-eight weeks. In the twenty-fourth week the entire nationwide program was cancelled by an act of Congress. The ostensible reason was that the program was "undemocratic," favoring either those who had college educations where they

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learned foreign languages, or the children of immigrants who learned it at home. The *real* reason (which, of course, could not be uttered in public) was that military debacles made the need for more "cannon fodder" imperative. They needed more infantry men, and "intelligence" was a superfluous luxury at that point. My experience in the army suggests to me that intelligence is always a superfluous luxury for them. Anyway, being sent back to the infantry was crushing to the morale, and seemed to increase, if possible, the emotional and mental torpor (a protective reaction, of course) that had made it impossible for me to read. I stayed in that numbed state until long after I was discharged, having seen over half my company killed or wounded in action.

INTERVIEWER

And what happened after your discharge?

HECHT

I was consistently drunk for well over two weeks. My parents were particularly forbearing and indulgent about this. They kept me in full supply of booze. I think I drank day and night, and I fell asleep most nights on the floor of their New York apartment. The drink must have served as a sort of narcotic for everything unmentionable that had happened or that I saw during those years.

INTERVIEWER

Did any of this repressed "unmentionable" material ever find its way to the surface in any of your work?

HECHT

Yes. In "Vespers," for example, there's a soldier who has the top of his head blown off. That happened to a friend of mine, a member of my company. I saw it.

INTERVIEWER

And did you quit drinking after those weeks?

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HECHT

Certainly not. I have drunk, probably too much, ever since then, and to this day I get jumpy and restless in the evening if I have nothing to drink.

INTERVIEWER

Has it been a "problem"?

HECHT

Not in the "Lost Weekend" sense, if that's what you mean. I have not felt the need to resort to cunning devices and secret caches of booze. I have never joined AA, or felt I needed to. But still, I had after a while acquired a reputation for drinking. I was amused by a letter from Allen Tate, in which he congratulated me on winning the Rome Prize (he had been my chief advocate on the committee that made the choice) and warned me not to drink too much at the Academy in Rome, lest I disgrace the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters (which awarded the grant) and so offend the Academy in Rome as to persuade them never to admit another writer. You see, this was the first writing fellowship ever conferred. What amused me was that, as I saw it, Tate drank much more than I did in those days.

INTERVIEWER

Did you ever try drugs?

HECHT

I've smoked pot a few times, and that was long ago. I've been very timid about drugs. Once, at a New Year's Eve party, Jack Kerouac offered to share a stick of pot with me; at that time I had never taken anything at all of that sort, and I thought of anyone who did as a "dope fiend" out of Victorian melodrama. I liked Jack a lot, and I was flattered by his offer to share his joint with me, but I excused myself on the grounds that what I really wanted was some more booze. Actually, I had already drunk so much that the pot would probably have

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had no effect; and in addition, it rarely has any effect the first time it is taken.

INTERVIEWER

What brought you to John Crowe Ransom?

HECHT

For the credits I earned at Carleton, Bard was able to award me my B.A. *in absentia*, but while I was overseas in Europe I met a fellow soldier named Robie Macauley, who was a Kenyon graduate. It was he who told me about his college, and about some of the students and faculty at Kenyon. The faculty, besides Ransom, included Randall Jarrell, and the students included Robert Lowell and Peter Taylor. Robie was very eloquent about them all, as well as about the school. When I was discharged, I got hold of some of Ransom's work, and read it for the first time. It astonished and bewildered me. I had read no modern poetry (I don't think I even knew Hardy's work) that so defiantly employed archaisms, elaborate inversions of word order, and a diction and idiom so alien to modern speech. I also bought Lowell's first, limited edition volume called *Land of Unlikeness*, and I read Peter Taylor's stories in the *Kenyon Review*. I was blessedly entitled to the G.I. Bill, which would send me back to college. I already had my B.A., but after years of communicating in the coarse, monosyllabic illiteracies that are standard military procedure and parlance, I scarcely felt ready for graduate school. So I elected to go to Kenyon as a special student on the strength of what I had heard and read. Ransom was in certain ways a dangerous influence, precisely because his poetry was so idiosyncratic. One can't, for example, imitate Hopkins or Cummings without betraying oneself as a derivative talent. And a few of my early poems ("Samuel Sewall," for instance) are painfully obvious acts of homage or dutiful aping. Ransom, who was generous, and valuable to me, had to be erased, or at least diminished as a model. And this was done by adopting other models, including Yeats, Frost, Eliot and Stevens. Each of

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these erased his predecessor, but I learned valuably from all of them.

INTERVIEWER

But there is a considerable difference between the page and the office; between looking over, say, Yeats's shoulder and having Mr. Ransom look over yours. Those are two very different kinds of teaching.

HECHT

Yes, but they turn out to be the same in the long run. I mean, they produce the same effect. Students almost invariably, and with touching naiveté, want clear, straightforward answers that are quickly applicable; they want their own confusions promptly resolved. They approach a living mentor in the reverent and pious hope that his wisdom and their own patience and humility will produce clarification in comparatively short order. This, however, almost never happens, except as regards the most elementary order of questions. Whatever I learned from Mr. Ransom didn't sift through until many years after I'd studied with him. And a great deal of what I learned came from a patient discovery that I disagreed with him. In fact, I think I have probably learned as much this way as any other. A good teacher (who need not be present, or even alive) is one who provokes you to serious, long-term thought. And I would not have dared rashly or hastily to find fault with any of Mr. Ransom's ideas; it required years of wide reading and steady thinking before I was able to "conclude" anything. Yeats, whom, of course, I never met, and in whose critical opinions I was not at all interested, served for me not merely as an astonishing model, but as a sort of Zen master, since he was in a position to abide my most pressing questions in total silence. Early poems of mine tried hard to imitate Yeats in his most stately and dated diction, and this may have been what then struck me as his most "poetic" aspect. There was, after all, something dated and archaic about Ransom's diction, too. But as time passed what I came most to admire, and to learn from, in Yeats was his "dialectical imagination," his profound

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conviction that everything involves its opposite. Saying these things in this bald way is not edifying, and if some teacher had said to me, even insistently, "all things are involved with their opposites," I would dutifully have copied it down, and remembered it, and thought about it off and on for a long time. But I probably wouldn't have learned anything from it until, in Keats's words, I had "tried it on my pulses." In much the same way, freshman philosophy courses used to illustrate a syllogism in the first figure with: "All men are mortal; Plato is a man; therefore, Plato is mortal." Everyone took notes, copied the syllogism, learned to distinguish the first figure from others. But it was likely to be the exceedingly rare freshman who actually believed that he was mortal. What is involved here, of course, has something to do with maturity, and I was slow to mature.

INTERVIEWER

Going back to the list of influences, there are two names I want to ask you about. One that you didn't mention—Auden. And one that you did—Robert Lowell. You say you bought *Land of Unlikeness*. How did it strike you?

HECHT

To take Lowell first: I bought and read *Land of Unlikeness* before I had ever met Lowell, and the first thing that impressed me, curiously, was the frequency of hyphens. This was somehow conspicuous because of the exotic typeface used in the limited edition of that book. But the hyphens were simply one of the signs of a harshly compact diction that characterized this early work, and part of its enormous, ferocious power. I envied that power; or, more accurately, I envied the seeming self-confidence that gave rise to it. The self-confidence was based on religious premises that were at once orthodox and heterodox. From the vantage of a newly-espoused Roman Catholicism, Lowell could, with all the vehemence of an Old Testament prophet, condemn not only whatever he found fault with in his own and this nation's Puritan heritage, but our participation in World War II. It was a sweeping repudia-

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tion of almost everything but the mysteries of the Church. As time went on, I came to see that what had enchanted Lowell was not the faith but the power it lent him. And he was someone who was always interested in power. I must admit that I regard all such people with considerable distrust, though Lowell himself was always kind and considerate to me. But I had no illusions about him, and would never have wanted to become his close friend, because I was certain he would take advantage of that friendship, as he certainly did with many others. Perhaps all fields, except the very humblest, can be divided among those who crave power and those who don't. Among poets, for example, I would say that Elizabeth Bishop did not, nor do James Merrill or John Ashbery. Neither did James Wright. But the self-promoters and log-rollers are in the vast majority. As for Auden, there was a tiny bit of the snob in him (he was awfully pleased to work with Stravinsky), but he had the decency to be ashamed of this weakness, and spent a lot of thought and energy trying to repair this character fault. He was, I think, quite simply one of the best human beings I have ever known, and what made him so good was that he had to work at it, and he gave it enormous thought. He was also one of the best-educated people I had ever met. I met him in Ischia, to which I had come purely as an economy, and without any knowledge that he was there. When he learned (from others) that I wrote poems, he generously asked to see some, and gave me the most careful and tactful of comments on them. During this period he was serving as the sole judge for the Yale Series of Younger Poets, and he once asked me if I would help him read his way through the piles of stuff that had been sent from the States. We divided the stack in half, but neither of us found anything of any real merit whatever; Auden found this especially odd because, he said, he knew that at least one poet of real ability had submitted his work; so he had to assume the poem had been eliminated by the stateside screeners. So he decided to write to this poet, and ask him to submit his manuscript to him directly. I assume that this was done; in any case, the winner for that year was John Ashbery.

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INTERVIEWER

I should think you and Auden shared a good many predilections—the formal strategies, the ironic moralism, the long historical view and eye for contemporary manners. But I'm curious: what sort of suggestions did he make about your poems? Did they have to do with a poem's conception, or with smaller matters of adjustment? Can you recall?

HECHT

They were all small matters, details. This was part of his tact, but also a way of emphasizing the importance of details. All his comments of this sort were offered as suggestions, and every suggestion he made I believe I adopted. They all seemed to me eminently reasonable and valuable, though none of them astonished me. What he did was very much the sort of thing poets who are friends often do for one another, and I myself have done it for friends of mine who are poets and who have sent me manuscript poems in the mail for comment. I make suggestions (unless, of course, the poem seems perfectly satisfactory as it stands), and the poet is free to adopt my suggestions or ignore them as he, or she, chooses. This is so common a practice that I could not if I tried remember how often I have done it, or for how many poets, or which ones. But to return to the shared predilections, Auden was a poet I had admired and learned from before I had ever met him, and I had adopted, consciously, some of his poetic modes and methods: for example, the essay poem, which presents a general topic and wanders through it in no specified order but in a casual amble, as one might make a series of visual discoveries by wandering around a well-planned garden. My metaphor here was quite obviously chosen with my own attempts at this mode in mind; I wrote two such poems, both about gardens, one of them about the Brooklyn Botanical Garden and the other about the gardens of the Villa D'Este. But Auden did not confine himself to anything like a narrow genre of this sort. His essay poems would include works as diverse as the poem in memory of Sigmund Freud and "In Praise of Limestone." In any case, if I share any other literary characteristics with Au-

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den, the chances are very great that I acquired them through studying his work.

INTERVIEWER

What are your memories of him on Ischia?

HECHT

He kept to an inflexible schedule of work and play. He rose early, wrote and read before breakfast, which was likely to be no more than coffee. (I was told all this.) Continued work till about three PM, pausing for a light lunch. The rest of the day was for relaxation and amusement. He used to say that he was never able to work beyond mid-afternoon, but only came to understand the reason for this when he had become a convinced Christian, because he then realized that three PM is the canonical hour of the crucifixion. He was no less punctual about cocktails and dinner, and went home to bed, even being known to leave his own birthday parties at a fixed time in order to be up and at work at his scheduled time of, I think it was, six. He credited his parents with instilling in him this useful discipline. He liked quizzing people, and playing what might be called "parlor games," in which everyone takes part and reveals something about himself. He once defined purgatory as a place where you had to stay in the intimate company of the person you most detested until you had come to love them in a completely merciful and disinterested way. Each of us (a small group of his friends and acquaintances) was invited to identify such a person. I can't remember who I came up with; those were days when my powers of detestation were comparatively unpracticed. And I don't think it's right for me to name Auden's candidate. There was another game of this sort that also had its religious aspect. He was fond of maintaining that art should be amusing, accessible, and without pretentions to *ultimate statements*, to solemn pomposities. All such art he found a bore, and he used to taunt us by saying that anyone who claimed he really enjoyed Beethoven's late quartets was simply putting on airs. He carried this argument to

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extremes, I may add, to the point of insisting that art and its subject ought to be nearly frivolous. It was a strong argument for camp taste, but what was interesting about it was its theological foundation. The game invited participants to imagine that they knew they were to die in a state of grace in six months with complete assurance of a heavenly estate after death. This meant that they were freed from all anxieties, and had no need for penitential thoughts or actions, nor spiritual clysters or edification. There was no need to be, as the phrase goes, "uplifted." His argument was that a lot of people foolishly confuse being "uplifted" with aesthetic enjoyment, when in fact they're only hankering after a cheap and artifically induced elation, which they associate with rectitude and purity and upon which they congratulate themselves. So, given these remarkable conditions, we were all asked to say what novel or novels we would read; what lyric poems; which paintings we would like to look at, and what music we'd like to hear. Remember that the central point is that there was no need to do anything "improving," only to enjoy yourself—which Auden insisted was all art was meant to do. I remember his choices. He wanted to read the novels of Ronald Firbank, the lyrics of Tennyson, look at the paintings of Caravaggio, and listen to, this last pains me, the overtures of Rossini. But I must add that my fondness for Bach pained him.

INTERVIEWER

Did you keep up your friendship in later years?

HECHT

Alas, no. I saw him only occasionally in later years. I was once asked to the home of Reinhold Niebuhr to celebrate one of Auden's birthdays; this was a very sedate occasion. And he invited me to come to visit him when he was living in the East Village, but I never did.

INTERVIEWER

Let's get back to your early work. Beneath the surface of rational control, and rhetorical aplomb, there is a good deal of

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nastiness there—suffering, physical pain, mental anguish. Was there some kind of symbiotic relationship between the calm, deliberate technique and those roiling feelings?

HECHT

Of course. The first serious poem I ever tried to write was a disaster, and it was bad because I tried to express unmediated feelings about one of my father's collapses. The poem was bad for every possible reason: I didn't really know what my feelings were, to begin with, except, of course, that they were strong feelings; I hadn't written much poetry, and wasn't very good at it; and I had neither found, nor even looked for, what Eliot called an "objective correlative" for my feelings. I was just trying to indicate that I had some strong feelings without telling the reader what prompted them. But in due course I went to study with Mr. Ransom, and both his own practice as a poet and the remarks he made in class as well as in his essays were very salutatory and useful to me. I can no longer remember whether I read or heard him declare that a young man in the toils and thralls of love is particularly unfit to write a love poem, and that he must distance himself from his esctasy before he can command enough self-possession and artistic disinterestedness to be able to write about it. But this made enormously good sense to me. It explained to me why my early work was so bad; it excused me from the task of setting down raw and unconsidered emotion; and it suggested a strategy by which to proceed. That is, instead of writing about what left me almost wordless with confused feelings, I could write about situations that no longer disturbed me, from which I had emerged either scathed or unscathed, and I could also write about what had happened to others. Best of all, I could write about what happened to me if I disguised myself as someone else. And as soon as I realized that I no longer depended on the "authentication" of my own feelings or biography, but could write, as all novelists and playwrights do, through the identities of persons either real or invented, I was freed from the tyranny of self-absorption. This didn't mean, of course, that I instantly began to write dandy poems. But I was freed

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to experiment with other voices than my own, and encouraged to empathize with the experience of others. And slowly my work did in fact begin to improve.

INTERVIEWER

Then the suffering, pain and anguish I mentioned may or may not be your own?

HECHT

Just so. It is at least mine insofar as I can identify with it, and it may be a good deal more personal than that in ways I have no intention of making public. In his lectures, "The Varieties of Religious Experience," William James describes humans in terms of various temperamental types. Of these, the first he speaks of is the "healthy-minded" soul (he puts Whitman in this class), which describes people who by religious conviction or by metabolic blessedness are invariably cheerful and optimistic. Emerson had such a temperament, as did all those very American people who can say, along with Will Rogers, that they never met a man they didn't like. But James goes on to oppose the "healthy-minded" to "the sick soul," and I'm afraid that I would have to identify myself with this second group.

INTERVIEWER

Then let me ask the question more directly. There are several and, it seems, tortured references in *The Hard Hours*. Just how personal are they?

HECHT

Quite personal indeed, though it would take a lot of time to trace all of them and track down each detail. But by the time that book was published I had served in combat as an infantry rifleman, and had been among the first troops to capture one of the German concentration and extermination camps, namely Flossenburg. I had seen a lot of people killed. I had emerged shaken from an almost consistently unhappy marriage of some five years' duration, during which two sons

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were born. My former wife then settled in Europe, married a European, and took my sons with her. My grief at the departure of my boys was paralyzing; I was hospitalized for three months for profound depression. But apart from specific events, it may be that some genetic or metabolic disposition assigns me to the "sick soul" category of William James. I find myself at home with such a mind as Dostoyevsky's or Kafka's, and have even found myself in argument with two scholarly friends who believe that *King Lear* has an affirmative ending.

INTERVIEWER

But aside from habitual temperament or chemical predisposition, there have been intervals of special stress, am I right?

HECHT

Of course. The hospitalization for depression was the most severe, I imagine. The ostensible excuse was that it was safest to administer drugs, thorazine in my case, under hospital conditions. Many of the other patients were undergoing electric shock. After about two and a half months, I was allowed to go out on brief daytime passes, but had to readmit myself each evening. My children were by then long gone. It was during this period that Lowell was especially kind to me and sympathetic. I was deeply moved and very grateful to him for his understanding. But after all, we seemed to share a common affliction, and not merely with one another, but with an astonishing number of American poets. It seemed almost a professional deformity. It's almost a litany to name them: Roethke, Berryman, James Wright, Plath, Sexton, Eliot, Pound, Carruth, Ginsberg, Mona Van Duyn, Delmore Schwartz. . . . this is not an exhaustive list. I have a theory, too complicated to rattle off here, as to why this has come about (historically, the symptoms began in the eighteenth century), but this is not the occasion for such speculations.

INTERVIEWER

I assume from what you've already said that you weren't able to make immediate poetic use of your experience in the hospital.

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HECHT

No, I wasn't, but it came in handy when I was composing "The Venetian Vespers," which has a few nuthouse details in it.

INTERVIEWER

You're like Elizabeth Bishop in letting quite a few years pass between books.

HECHT

Thanks for the flattering comparison. In her case, critics have suggested that a fastidious perfectionism might account for her "literary parsimony." I have no idea what the *real* cause may have been in her case, and I'm only dimly conscious in my own case. Allen Tate used to say that he thought every poem he wrote was possibly his last. I've felt that way myself over the years, always hoping that with maturity or habit, some wellspring would be tapped and turn into a dependable and abundant flow. Alas, it hasn't happened. I always enjoy the exhilaration of actually writing, and the relief and self-admiring satisfaction of finishing. This last may even become unduly prolonged. But sooner or later even the poem I'm most proud of lies lifeless on the page before me, completely inert and without merit; and I have no idea where another will come from, or when. Doubtless there are deep reasons for this, and causes over which I have never gotten much control. My father was in certain ways a shackled and enfeebled man. He tried three times in his life to commit suicide because he had lost not only every cent that he had, but the fortunes of friendly investors as well. My brother, who is nearly three years younger than I, and also a poet, has been dealt with much more cruelly by life than I have. He has suffered from epilepsy from birth, and has lived pretty much as a recluse. These are the two people who, in my childhood, would have been my natural rivals; and since each was handicapped, I felt I had to pull my punches. But it was more than that. I remember feeling from very early on that any success of mine was *ipso facto* painful to both of them. My father was ashamed of his failures and resented my successes, and I was completely aware of this. No doubt I chose poetry as a vocation in the first place because

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in at least one sense it may be regarded as uncompetitive. But in another sense, of course, it's not. I recall Lowell writing to Roethke, and saying: "I remember Edwin Muir arguing with me that there is no rivalry in poetry. Well, there is." Anyway, when you feel that the work you do best and enjoy most causes anguish for others (and especially for those others who, under different circumstances, would be your natural rivals), you are understandably hampered; and I have never been able to free myself of this self-imposed constraint and feeling of guilt about such accomplishments as have been mine. That's a pretty long-winded answer, and may not be the whole truth, but at least it's part of it.

INTERVIEWER

How do you tell when a book—or for that matter, a poem—is finished?

HECHT

Better start with the poem. There are two famous schools of thought about this, one represented by Yeats, who said something like, "A poem comes right with a click, like a box snapping closed;" and the other by Paul Valéry, who declared that poems are never finished, only abandoned. I have nothing novel or useful to add to the controversy. To the degree that a poem strives for formal harmonies—by which I mean not only meter and rhyme, but the careful and deliberate resolution of all its parts, themes, metaphoric structures—the poet is in a position to gauge, to a certain degree, the extent of his success, at least in regard to his self-assigned task of braiding his loose ends into a coherent pattern. And he is able to guess how much tinkering still needs to be done. In verse of a looser kind a keener instinct is needed, and this is what so vividly distinguishes a truly remarkable poet like William Carlos Williams from his disciples. As for the book, for better or worse, I incline often to think of it as composed musically. That is to say, I like to demonstrate variety when possible by juxtaposition of items of different form, length, technique, and so forth. My general feeling, however, is that poets, with a few

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exceptions, sweat blood over these matters and they are noticed neither by reviewers nor by readers, and all the painful calibrations and measurements are for nothing. Sometimes, of course, a prolific poet, like Yeats or Frost or Stevens, will produce a book that has a beautiful and self-evident consistency, coming as it does out of a major preoccupation with a theme, or even with a form, like dramatic monologue. The nearest I have come to such achievement has been in the writing of some poems that I consider "long."

INTERVIEWER

That sounds as if you prefer the long poem.

HECHT

My own long poem, "The Venetian Vespers," is no more than a trifle, a verse epigram, compared with something as genuinely large and ambitious in scope as, say, James Merrill's Dantean trilogy, *The Changing Light at Sandover*, or such book-length works as Alfred Corn's equally Dantean *Notes From a Child of Paradise*, or Frederick Turner's *The New World*. I mention these as distinct from, say, Olson's or Pound's stuff because the latter two produced work of a loose and shapeless kind—strung together, of course, by themes and musical devices, but without the shapeliness of major formal considerations. I prefer the work that is decidedly more architectural, in which parts balance one another, and in which everything is essential, so that if something is removed or misplaced, the whole thing collapses, as would be the case with a large building. This is one of the reasons St. Mark's basilica plays a prominent role in my poem.

INTERVIEWER

What is it about the metaphor of "architectural" structure that makes it preferable in your mind to a "musical" one?

HECHT

Well, I've never heard Pound's opera, and I've no idea what it's like, but a lot of people who talk glibly about musical

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structures have very feeble notions of music, and are convinced that a few scattered echoes and repetitions, a few recapitulations of thematic materials, are evidence, as far as the poem is concerned, of a brilliantly integrated fugal patterning. After all, it was Pound who told Yeats that the Cantos would be structured like a fugue; yet not even the earliest groups of them can be said to be fugal without seriously weakening our sense of the word. They are in fact more Wagnerian in structure than Bach-like. Normally, in any case, the word "musical" is applied indiscriminately to Swinburne, Hopkins, Poe and Dylan Thomas, and in these cases it has little to do with anything so severe and skeletal as structure.

INTERVIEWER

What, then, do you mean by "structure" in connection with a long poem, and what is its use?

HECHT

I remember long ago seeing a large spread in *Life* about William Faulkner. Lots of excellent photographs, and at least one of his study. He had covered one entire wall with aligned rows of typing paper on which he had outlined the various parts of the novel he was working on. The whole thing, in all its diversity and complexity, lay mapped out before him on the wall, and he was able to address any part of it at his convenience, always conscious of its relation to and place in the whole design. I can't tell you what freedom from anxiety this provides. You go to work at whatever you can, or wish to, work on, and at the end of the day you can go to bed in peace, knowing where and how you can start up again. But when you have come near finishing a short poem you can only continue to tinker with it, and fret about where the next poem will come from.

INTERVIEWER

Have any readers taken notice of your formal concerns in this matter?

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HECHT

I was greatly gratified when a Cornell student commented on the ghostly paradigm of *Hamlet* behind "Vespers."

INTERVIEWER

Do you revise a lot?

HECHT

Yes, though a lot of so-called revision seems to go on in the head before a single word has been set down on paper. I write slowly and painstakingly. Those who don't like what I write feel it is not worth even my own pains, much less theirs. A few years ago I found myself at a pre-prandial sherry party in the poetry office of the Library of Congress where some seven or eight fellow poets were assembled for a special occasion, and I was more shocked than I can easily convey to find that I was the only poet in the room who did *not* compose on a typewriter. Of course now, with word-processors, revising is a cinch, but they're too expensive for me. I seem still to belong to the oaten reed or goose quill stage of development.

INTERVIEWER

When you revise, what sort of weakness do you look for? Or do you instead look for something that's missing?

HECHT

Both. Prosodic matters aside, it often seems to come down to attaining a language that is supple or flexible enough to rise to climactic occasions, but also to be able to do drone's work without the appearance of it.

INTERVIEWER

Do you show your work to friends before publishing it?

HECHT

Yes, I do. My wife is one of my best and most astute critics, and while she is cautious about my feelings, she always knows

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when something's wrong. Most often I have shown or sent my work to fellow poets—who, in turn, have often asked me to comment on new work of theirs—but there have been other friends, academic colleagues, whose views I trust. Sometimes there are poems in which I have enough confidence to know they're all right. I don't object to showing such poems to friends as well, though in these cases I am not looking for suggestions but simply for approval. There is no problem about conveying the distinction between these. And one can simply ignore advice that seems wrong or off the point. It is worth adding that I have enough confidence in my editor, Harry Ford, to feel that he would not let me make a complete fool of myself, and nothing would work its way into book form that had not at least *some* merit.

INTERVIEWER

Your study upstairs is divided into two rooms, one for books and the other with a desk. Is there some deep purpose in that arrangement—your thinking, for instance, of reading and writing as very different jobs?

HECHT

No, it's a purely practical solution to a problem with space. There wouldn't be room for the right-sized desk in the room with all the bookcases.

INTERVIEWER

Do you go to that desk every day?

HECHT

Yes, I do. But it's not always to do what I ought to be doing, which is to write either poetry or prose. Let's just say there is always *paperwork* to do.

INTERVIEWER

I noticed your O.E.D. up there. Have you always used it?

HECHT

No. After I'd finished translating Aeschylus I became an

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Oxford author and found from a little note they sent me that I was entitled to a huge discount on Oxford books. That became my great temptation to get the O.E.D. I wouldn't have been able to afford it otherwise. I love the book. I read in it all the time, and have learned a great deal from it. I don't sit on it the way Auden did, but I have to say with shame that I went through all my undergraduate years without having heard of it. No teacher ever referred to it. But after I got out of the army, I studied with Empson at the Kenyon Summer School, and he made constant reference to the O.E.D., and, as you probably know, in his *Structure of Complex Words* he has a chapter devoted to how the O.E.D. can be improved. After Empson I became fascinated by the book, but it was only later that I was able to buy my own copy.

INTERVIEWER

Your poems include a lot of words like "mucid" or "pavonine," not in the average man's working vocabulary. Do you count on a reader's knowing their etymology?

HECHT

No, but I count on his taking the trouble to look them up. On the other hand, I normally put them into the mouth of a person who is characterized as one who uses an exotic language. The narrator of "The Venetian Vespers," for example, is someone who out of a kind of pathological drive learnt a lot of fancy language. So that was an excuse for my elaborations.

INTERVIEWER

There must obviously be new books of poems you look forward to. How do you read your contemporaries? Just to take delight, or to learn?

HECHT

Certainly for delight. The real test is that when you pick up a book you haven't read yet by Bishop or Merrill, you're confident that every poem, one after the next, is not going to

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disappoint. Each will have its merit and excitement and invention, and that kind of confidence is satisfying.

INTERVIEWER

Isn't that really the feeling one has about the classics?

HECHT

Yes. But then there's also that edgy, two-pronged feeling—one of envy, and also hope that you can learn something, or even pilfer something. It may give you an idea, start you off on something of your own.

INTERVIEWER

Can you give me an example of something you learned from reading, say, a Bishop poem?

HECHT

Hmmm. I'm *sure* I could, but these are probably the things one suppresses out of psychological necessity. There's a codicil to this. You're always impressed by the work of others because someone else thought of it and you didn't. Your own ideas never quite seem as original to you as the ideas of somebody else. So I always read the work of others with astonishment, and read my own with a certain initial pleasure that quickly stales because now it's mine and it doesn't seem so bright after all.

INTERVIEWER

I wonder if your oldest poems may have receded so far in your mind that they would seem fresh again on re-reading.

HECHT

I wish that might happen, but I don't think it does. The awful thing I have to confess is that when I write something I'm really pleased with, I really *am* pleased, and read it over and over and over again. There's a terrible narcissism involved in the immediate satisfaction of finishing a poem and that means I drain it of all the pleasure at the start.

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INTERVIEWER

What are the poems of yours that still give you that kind of pleasure you take in poems by others?

HECHT

It's almost invariably the latest. I like a poem called "The Cost"—or I like it more than other people like it. And I like the narrative poems in *Vespers*.

INTERVIEWER

Do you keep a notebook to jot down phrases and ideas?

HECHT

Yes. But I've had a very unhappy experience with notebooks. The impulse to write a poem had better be followed up pretty soon, because I find that something put away for years in a notebook lacks any kind of force. Obviously those little notes are the seeds of enormous potential, and one senses it, but if the seed is put away to dry in a drawer for a long time it emerges without all the inference it ought to carry. So I've found the notebooks, in that sense, not helpful to me. The seed may be anything—a phrase, a subject—but if I don't pursue it immediately, the chances are its appeal will be lost to me if I return to it after a long interval.

INTERVIEWER

Yet a poem like "The Venetian Vespers" seems like a poem that might have been in mind for a long while.

HECHT

Except in fact it was not. There were a lot of notes taken for it, but they were almost all of descriptive matter—that is to say, what clouds look like when they travel through the sky or what lamplight looks like reflected in rainwater. Things of that sort.

INTERVIEWER

You continually make notes of that sort.

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HECHT

I do.

INTERVIEWER

The way Constable might sketch a cloud study.

HECHT

Exactly.

INTERVIEWER

Are they always descriptive notes, or are they sometimes bits of conversation?

HECHT

I've almost never made notes of conversations. I would if I were a writer of fiction or a dramatist, but I'm not.

INTERVIEWER

Did you ever want to write a novel?

HECHT

No . . . well, yes. I started a novel once. But I abandoned it, and was wise to do so. It would have been rotten. It was about the war. And, in fact, Macmillan, which published my first book, originally said they would publish it only on the condition that I gave them the novel too. They were at least intelligent in expecting the novel to sell better than the poetry. I'd written the books in tandem, but at a certain point I realized I didn't know what I was doing as a novelist, whereas I had a vague sense that I knew what I was doing when I was writing poems.

INTERVIEWER

It was Auden who warned that "technique in itself cannot make a good poem, but the lack of it can spoil one." It's the technique that critics often point to first in your poems, but is it the first thing you think about when you start a poem?

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Do you have a form, or at least a shape, in mind before you begin?

HECHT

Let me try to answer this by reference to another poet, Frost, who was also concerned with "technique." You remember his apothegm about writing poetry without meter being like playing tennis with the net down. He also said something in a well-known essay about "the figure a poem makes. It begins in delight and ends in wisdom. The figure is the same as for love. . . . It begins in delight, it inclines to the impulse, it assumes direction with the first line laid down, it runs a course of lucky events, and ends with a clarification of life—not necessarily a great clarification, such as sects and cults are founded on, but in a momentary stay against confusion. It has denouement. It has an outcome that though unforeseen was predestined from the first image of the original mood—and indeed from the very mood. It is but a trick poem and no poem at all if the best of it was thought of first and saved for the last." There is an awful lot stated here, and still more implied. Chief among the statements, I suppose, is the mystery of the "predestination" of the poem, and how its course and direction must be unknown to the poet until he discovers it in the process of writing. How is the poet to be kept from knowing what he's doing? Easy enough if he's a stupid poet, of course, but suppose he's reasonably bright? The answer, it seems to me, is technique. If the poet sets himself some technical strictures to observe, he will find that they require him to reconsider much of what he thought at first impulse was the direction which he was going to take. Technique checks his headlong instincts and invites second thoughts; not only invites them, but by its limitations requires them. In his comments on his translation of Villon, Galway Kinnell has written, "I decided against using meter and rhyme . . . What is more expressive of a poet than his images? Yet in rhyming translations we can't even be sure the images are the poet's . . . And I wonder, do rhyme and meter mean for us what they

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meant for Villon? It may be that in our day these formal devices have become a dead hand, which it is just as well not to lay on any poetry." I think Kinnell is wrong here, both in his theory of translation and of poetry; and I'm not speaking about the anachronistic fallacy of trying to make Villon observe modern poetic conventions. One of the pleasures of reading formal poetry surely consists in seeing how well the poet is able to work within his limitations of meter and rhyme. We applaud his success because we sense its difficulty, just as we appreciate the success of an athlete by comprehending the limits, the tennis net, he must work with and transcend.

INTERVIEWER

Have you any further thoughts on this question of "technique"?

HECHT

Well, as a matter of fact I have. One of the most striking features of the modernist and post-modernist poetic scene is the abundance of "theorists," of poets who offer a new "poetics" in what amounts to a doctrinal form. Pound is a hectoring didact on the topic; Charles Olson and Robert Creeley have decided ideas about what constitutes the "poetic line," the right kind of line for verse; and William Carlos Williams got into the act as well. I happen to think Williams is a wonderful poet *in spite of* rather than *because of* his theories. Poems, first and last, must stand on their own feet, whether the feet are "variable" or not, and theories will never succeed in protecting a bad poem. I find myself consenting fully to Byron when he wrote to Thomas Moore, "Hunt's letter is probably the exact piece of vulgar coxcombery you might expect from his situation. He is a good man, with some poetical elements in his chaos; but spoilt by Christ-Church Hospital and a Sunday newspaper, to say nothing of the Surry Jail, which conceited him into a martyr. But he is a good man. When I saw 'Rimini' in manuscript I told him that I deemed it very good poetry at bottom, disfigured only by a strange style. His answer was that his style was a system, or *upon system*, or some

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such cant; and, when a man talks of system, his case is hopeless: so I said no more to him, and very little to anyone else."

INTERVIEWER

You aren't implying that it's wrong to think about these matters in a rational and disciplined way, are you?

HECHT

Not at all. It is, for many, an interesting topic, and one that poets need to be aware of. But, at least occasionally, the theories are offered to bolster what amounts to faulty performance, and even tin ears. Thomas Jefferson himself, who was gifted in many fields, had something to say on this topic, which I have always thought characteristic of his mind. He wrote, "Everyone knows the difference between verse and prose in his native language. . . ." Such a statement comes with a touching rightness from the imagination that also declared, "We hold these truths to be self-evident . . ." A lovely eighteenth-century clarity, the kind that prized a Palladian architecture. But the world of our time has put Jefferson's faith and taste to shame in almost every conceivable way. There are, alas (and I have behind me forty years of teaching to substantiate this), plenty of Americans (and some of them poets) who *cannot* tell the difference between poetry and prose. And I'm not thinking now of the more "experimental" kinds of modern poems as being the cause of the confusion. What I'm saying is that I have found over the years that students can't tell Shakespeare's verse from his prose, and this is because they can't "hear" metrical patterns at all. They are, in this regard, "tone deaf," or, perhaps more accurately, rhythmically deficient. No one, however painfully his soul might yearn for it, would ever dream of trying to become a Metropolitan basso if he knew he were truly tone deaf. But the ambitions of those who fancy themselves as poets are not in the least constrained by any parallel considerations. And so you find *soi-disant* poets issuing manifestos declaring that metrical considerations are now irrelevant.

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INTERVIEWER

You spoke a little while ago about "comprehending the limits." But "limits" hardly seems the word to describe the kind of baroque architecture that your early poems—say, "The Gardens of the Villa d'Este"—have on display.

HECHT

Certainly the lozenge-shaped stanza of that poem, as well as of "La Condition Botanique," is spacious and designed for amplitude. Both poems are digressive, not quite as insanely and wildly digressive as Byron in *Don Juan,* or Sterne in *Tristram Shandy*, but a sort of *passeggiata*, an amble after the fashion of some of Auden's essay poems. From my point of view at the time of their writing, there were two related purposes for them to fulfill. I was trying to expand the "limits" of a poem so small or so "conventional" that its end was clearly implicit in its beginning. The weasel word here is "clearly," because the end of any poem must be implicit in its beginning. But it must not be absolutely foreseeable, at least by the reader, and possibly, as Frost has argued, not by the poet either. In any case, I wanted to take a long enough walk along convoluted passages in both poems to divert myself and my reader enough so that we might not know quite where we were going as we occupied ourselves along the way. Not unlike Prufrock's invitation to move circuitously through an unknown neighborhood; in his case it is compared to a "tedious argument of insidious intent to lead you to an overwhelming question." In my case, the hope was not to be tedious or insidious, and to have no precise question in mind at the start; the hope was to be taken by surprise. And this is the way with baroque art; one of the special pleasures it confers is surprise. This is as true of Bach as of Borromini. And yet, of course, to surprise the reader does not mean that the whole is unpremeditated. The only unpremeditated art I know of was performed by Shelley's skylark and the practitioners of automatic writing.

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INTERVIEWER

It seems to me that in the poems in *The Hard Hours*, you use those formal "limits" both to define and prompt the different *voices* that sound and overlap in them. The verse units become characters in the poem's drama. I'm thinking above all of the astonishing "Rites and Ceremonies."

HECHT

You put the matter flatteringly, and I was certainly trying for the effect you describe. But in this, of course, I am doing no more than what Lowell did in, say, "The Quaker Graveyard," by incorporating Milton and Thoreau and scripture and Melville into his poem, and what Frost did when sneaking a line or so of Herrick or Waller into a poem, or what Milton himself did so strikingly in "Lycidas." It means that as I am writing, certain texts that have meant much to me by their power or beauty are summoned by the theme or thoughts that preoccupy me, and when this happens I sometimes try to work a relevant phrase or passage into the fabric of my own poem as seamlessly as possible, so that the knowing reader will spot it, but another reader will not be intimidated by obscure allusions, like some of those in the Cantos, for example. The borrowed voices, I should like to hope, lend a sort of ancestral authority to what I am trying to say, but they also represent a kind of homage on my part. And so, if I have determined to employ a borrowed voice in this way, without quotation marks, without calling undue attention to the borrowing, I may find myself compelled (but pleased) to adopt the formal limitations of the poet from whom I am borrowing, and use them as if they were my own invention. An obvious example from "Rites and Ceremonies" is the appropriation of the "form," as well as several lines, of George Herbert's "Denial."

INTERVIEWER

These adopted *voices*, then, are not merely a matter of formal limits but of verbal music.

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HECHT

Exactly. Any good poet, of whatever kind, formalist or free-verser, creates his own music, which in due course we come to identify with his style. If he is a formalist, his musical capabilities can be enriched and complicated by the rhythms of his individual speech, his diction, his patterns of thought, which are uniquely his own, but which he has superimposed upon a formal pattern which is a part of our literary inheritance. A great number of Emily Dickinson's poems are written in tetrameter quatrains, which she is said to have borrowed from the hymnodists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, especially Isaac Watts. But what distinguishes her poetry is that, first of all, she never sounds like Watts, and secondly, her poems don't all sound like one another. As Frost said, "The possibilities for tune from the dramatic tones of meaning struck across the rigidity of a limited meter are endless." But this is still to speak only of what may be called received or conventional forms—the tetrameter quatrain, the sonnet, the heroic couplet. In the case of Herbert, we have something quite new and different. Except for a few poems, he invented most of his own forms, his utterance in this sense is nearly unique, and his music singular. Something of the sort can also be said for a number of seventeenth century lyricists; it was a great age of formal invention, of setting new "limits."

INTERVIEWER

So there are two kinds of limits, those the poet makes for himself, and those he borrows?

HECHT

Yes. A conventional form can predispose the expectations of a reader, and this need not be a handicap; it can prompt inventive opportunities. Shakespeare set some of the Petrarchan love conventions on their heads by inverting them in his sonnets; for sonnets traditionally had love for their subject. A reader, seeing a sonnet before him, thought he knew exactly what he was in for, and of course, it's the poet's job to surprise him. The same is true of the limerick. It's probably, given the

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length of the form, impossible to write a "tragic" limerick, or even a very moving one. But, nevertheless, our expectations are quite rigid when we are told we are going to hear one. The name of the form itself is supposed to derive from the county in Ireland of that name, and so a part of our predisposed expectations has to do with a tradition of light doggerel verse natively belonging to our own language. So we can be unusually pleased to hear:

Il y avait un jeune homme de Dijon
Qui n'aimait pas de tout la religion;
Il disait, "Quant à moi,
Je déteste tous les trois:
Et le Père, et le Fils, et le Pigeon."

The charm of this—not overwhelming, of course, but certainly present—lies in the unexpected appropriation of a limited formal music to a language we had never associated with it.

INTERVIEWER

The Venetian Vespers has a cast of characters in its various poems that a novelist might envy—the blowsy alcoholic housewife Shirley in "The Short End," the timid chambermaid in "The Grapes," the narrator of the title poem. May I ask you—I realize it's a broad question—how these characters occur to you, how they grow into poems?

HECHT

"The Venetian Vespers" began without a story, merely with the city, and with a speaker I could not clearly identify at the beginning. But I knew I wanted to make some kind of correspondence or equation between the speaker and the setting. The city, for me, was full of grandeur and decay, the decay evidenced in that it was overtly parasitic, surviving off tourism (the glass is all made at Murano, which is rather distant), and it was the parasitic and defeated aspect of Venice I wanted to capture in my narrator. In this sense, the poem obviously owes much to Mann's *Death in Venice*, and involves at least some of the same clusters of images: the hearse-like sheen of the

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black gondolas, the curious sea-smells not altogether wholesome. It was these themes or images that led me, by way of *Hamlet*, curiously, to my speaker. As you know, a number of critics, Caroline Spurgeon perhaps chief among them, have observed that *Hamlet* is particularly rich in images of disease. And in casting about for the sort of narrator I wanted, I remembered someone I had once known in Italy, a deeply troubled expatriate American. The story in the poem is quite accurately his story as he told it to me, but it is also, as you can tell from the father/uncle/son/mother constellation, Hamlet's story in a way as well. All these things seemed to fold together in a suitable way. I may add that the story about the soldier who cherished Emily Post, and the manner of his death, come straight from my own war experiences.

INTERVIEWER

And the other poems in the book?

HECHT

Well, having written that, for me, quite long poem, I wanted to balance the book with another long poem, and whereas "Vespers" had a man at its center and was set in Europe, I wanted the companion piece to be set in this country and have a woman as its chief figure. I also set a challenge to myself. I wanted to take an initially unprepossessing woman with whom neither I nor my imagined reader would have much in common, and try to win real sympathy for her by the time the poem was over. I may say, too, that the poem was written during the period when I had just given up smoking; I smoked heavily, three packs of unfiltered Philip Morris a day for thirty-five years. Some of the horror of the poem reflects what I had come to see as suicidal behavior. By this point in my career I was rather annoyed by the usual assumption of readers that every poem was direct and personal and expressed my own experience and views; and this all by itself encouraged me to write about women. As for the chambermaid in the Swiss hotel, that derived from some visits to the Tyrol, both Swiss and Austrian. There's something about those narrow val-

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leys and high mountains that gives one a feeling of being permanently hemmed in—for life. This can be regarded as a good thing or a bad one, depending on your view. To some, I suppose, it lends a welcome feeling of security, while to others it is terribly constricting and limiting. I had heard of local dwellers who had never ventured over into the next valley, being quite content with things as they were. This sort of blinkered privacy seemed to me to go hand in hand with a world in which the sort of "upward mobility" Americans seem axiomatically to strive for and to expect is either totally absent, or is only present as a caprice of Fate—as when a bar-maid becomes a movie starlet. And it was this strange, cloistered sense of hopelessness and defeat I wanted to convey. I had also remembered being in an Algerian bar in Paris shortly after World War II, and hearing the bartender bantering with a patron, saying that their former belly dancer was now married to a Swiss millionaire.

INTERVIEWER

It's sometimes said there is now a "return to formalism," which would in any case be a natural reaction to the by now exhausted energies of the minimalist or demotic styles that have prevailed in American poetry over the last couple of decades—a time, by the way, when your own work would have been looked at askance. What do you make of this turn in things?

HECHT

I'm not sure I quite agree with those who point to this vacillation of style. The so-called "formalists," which is to say, those poets who admire what form contributes to a poem, have been there all along, if one can include in one's view such diverse poets as Ransom, Winters, Graves, Tate, Lowell, Wilbur, Bishop, Roethke, Stevens, Moore, Auden, Empson, Berryman, Thomas, Nemerov, Merrill, Hollander, Walcott, and some of the younger poets such as Alfred Corn, Brad Leithauser, Norman Williams, Dana Gioia, Gjertrud Schnackenberg, Sydney Lea, Amy Clampitt and yourself. The list is by no means ex-

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haustive. But such poets as these regard themselves as affiliated with a wide spectrum of English and American poetry, and seem to wish to exhibit in their own work what has delighted them in the work of others. On the other hand, there are those poets who admire no one but, say, William Carlos Williams. He is, beyond question, a wonderful poet, and one not greatly honored in his early years. But the work of those who regard themselves as his heirs can often be toneless, boneless and boring. Williams had enormous energy in his work, and a spoken idiom that was both his own and a native American demotic. But there are those who seem to think that jus' talkin' is poetry, and that their devotion to Williams sanctifies their practice. Obviously, I will do well to name no names. But these two strands of what once was called "Paleface and Indian" have gone on in American poetry for some time, and have gone on side-by-side, not in shifting waves. Perhaps it can be argued that it is ever so slightly more respectable today to write formal verse than it was when everyone was getting emancipated in the sixties, and when the inalienable rights of Americans were deemed to include Free Love, Free Verse, and the Pursuit of Sloppiness. But that was more than simply a literary fashion, and it has now gone its way, like much else. Yet it can sometimes be argued that both trends exhibit themselves in the career of a single poet. I'd be prepared to advance the thesis that Anne Sexton's first two books were her best ones; and I would not be alone in thinking so. At the same time, something happened to her formal practice as a poet as she continued to write. She abandoned the formal constraints she had first observed, and her writing became less and less disciplined, as did some things about her psychic life as well. She became plainly self-indulgent, and I think this affected both her poems and her life.

INTERVIEWER

But the common complaint heard nowadays is not about the extremes, whether the *précieuses* or the latter-day hipsters. The complaint is about the burgeoning middle-class of poets, the workshop population who seem slickly competent but aimless.

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HECHT

Alas, there is always bad poetry being written; and bad poetry is bad whether it tries to be formal or decorous or workmanlike or not. There are few more revelatory experiences than going back over the old files of the very best of the innovative little magazines of the twenties and thirties—journals like *transition* or *Hound and Horn*. These magazines unquestionably published the best of what was then being written. They also sometimes published work that *seemed* avant-garde but was plain hollow, and has not stood up under the scrutiny of time. There will always be hacks, who will turn out whatever they think the market desires. And their work will be like the "junk" Wilbur has written so well about.

INTERVIEWER

It seems in retrospect that you started out to make a career in a calm time. What do you think of today's huge roving bands of poets, the skirmishes and the booty?

HECHT

I suppose I feel elderly enough not to care much anymore about such matters. There are always poets who rush to the fray, feeling they are bravely innovative, at the very forefront of the avant-garde, embattled, gleefully contemptuous. Such a one, for example, was Leigh Hunt, who, to the degree that he had any influence at all, had a bad influence on Keats. But the time I started can scarcely be called "calm." It was the era of the clarion manifestos of Archibald MacLeish and Van Wyck Brooks; the first wrote "The Irresponsibles" and the second "The Opinions of Oliver Alston," both declaring that poetry had to be "up-beat," "life-affirming," "pro-democracy," and a lot of things that were largely connected with the war effort. It goes without saying that they roundly condemned the, as they called it, "defeatist" poetry of T.S. Eliot. And almost immediately after the war there was the great Ezra Pound/Pisan Cantos controversy, led by that soapbox orator, Robert Hillyer; even Howard Mumford Jones joined in, asserting that literature should be "a guide and aide to wisdom," though how it guides and aids was not made clear. On the contrary, it seems

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to me that, at the time I began, the literary battles were both more vigorous and better defined than they are now. As for all the gangs of mutually admiring, spaced-out rebels, they seem to me on the whole both smug and boring.

INTERVIEWER

And when you started out writing, the term "well-wrought poem" wasn't the term of contempt it's become in some quarters. Did you ever feel the need some poets experience to change tactics, to abandon the high style?

HECHT

No, I didn't. Let's put it this way: obviously a poet needs to do anything he can to encourage his own breadth of imagination and his own fluency. If you are best encouraged by pushing those obstacles out of the way, then that's the thing for you to do. In the case of Lowell or James Wright, that did work for them. It doesn't automatically follow as an axiom that a well-made poem is going to be standardized.

INTERVIEWER

"The well-made poem" is not really a writer's term, but a reader's term—and often an excuse to avoid reading poems that might challenge them in ways they're not up to. And instead of changes in writing styles, you may have seen changes in reading habits over the years. People are no longer used to reading a certain sort of poem.

HECHT

Quite right. And the point is also that one doesn't stop liking John Donne because he doesn't write in free verse. There's an enormous amount of richness in Donne. Now Donne was one of my first literary enthusiasms, and I would still like to be able to write a poem as powerful, as energetic, as dense and full of intelligence, of passion as many Donne has written. If one could do that—and this was my initial ambition when I started writing poems seriously—I would be content doing that indefinitely, without ever making any concessions to loose prosody.

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INTERVIEWER

I wonder if it's not also a matter of younger poets simply not having read John Donne, where older poets were better schooled.

HECHT

Very likely. Or he's certainly not their hero. One of the curious things is that the heroes of many younger contemporary poets are their almost immediate predecessors.

INTERVIEWER

Do you feel your own audience shrinking?

HECHT

Oh, yes, sure. On the other hand, there comes a point when you cease trying to appeal to a mass audience.

INTERVIEWER

How *do* you imagine your audience?

HECHT

My audience, ideally, is those poets whose work I admire. That wouldn't sell many books!

INTERVIEWER

Is that enough to keep you happy?

HECHT

Not enough to keep a publisher happy, certainly. But I've never imagined myself as a poetic rock star, and poets can't hope to find the sort of audiences that seem like the automatic property of fiction writers. For better or worse, we have different constituencies. And I must take solace in Samuel Johnson's observation that the applause of a single human being is of great consequence, though it makes some difference who the human being is.

—J.D. McClatchy

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Primo Levi

For Adolf Eichmann

The wind runs free across our plains,
The live sea beats forever at our beaches.
Man makes earth fertile, earth gives him flowers and fruits.
He lives in toil and joy, he hopes, fears, begets sweet
offspring.

. . . And you have come, our precious enemy,
Forsaken creature, man ringed by death.
What can you say now, before our assembly?
Will you swear by a god? What god?
Will you leap happily into the grave?
Or will you at the end, like the industrious man
Whose life was too brief for his long art,
Lament your sorry work unfinished,
The thirteen million still alive?

Oh son of death, we do not wish you death.
May you live longer than anyone ever lived.
May you live sleepless five million nights,
And may you be visited each night by the suffering of
everyone who saw,
Shutting behind him, the door that blocked the way back,
Saw it grow dark around him, the air fill with death.

—translated from the Italian
by Ruth Feldman and Brian Swann

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Jean Zimmerman

The Weather at Birthday

It's as natural to begin to age
as it is to insist
on chocking the wheels with heads of peonies
but futile to continually
glance away at the velvet landscapes
lining the clefts between Chinese mountains
and so stop short.
My age is 29, two numbers
mildly astonishing, as when
a zoo seal shakes the droplets from its lashes
to gaze on a concrete concession hut.
I own, I mean, I share
one cat, one collander, a set of sharp knives,
a view of black city rooftops that shine
as if they'd been wept upon.
No matter how relentlessly I perform this act
of piling year upon year
—which includes
my hide stiffening over the inner purple gush,
soreness, sometimes physical,
a sharpening hand,
increasing, boring desires to discourse—
explosions happen.
I lie trapped in low-ceilinged rooms
where sand drifts up against the splashboards
to drown fast in the wet grease of dreams
while outside the planets, murderously ravishing,
are sucked careening through a sky
that is ancient as the face of a newborn.

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Martha Hollander

Difficult Movie

Reflected horribly in the grand piano,
the sky is offered up as your accompanist.
You pick out a melody with one hand,
sweating and waiting, while
the apartment stays unremittingly grey.
When she walks in through the half-open door
(an identical door can be glimpsed behind)
she seems to bring color with her.
Now you begin the dialogue of murmured threats
and nonsequiturs, and stare each other down.
The blinds throw satisfying stripes along a wall,
movements of sunlight litter the carpet,
and everywhere are the sweet gleams of
her earrings, your shared wineglass, a gun.
As you fall to kissing, twisting damply
in your sweaters, your own face
is smeared in a rictus of fear:
you're doomed if she speaks your name.

Yet your stalking and embracing change nothing.
Even at the odd instant she disappears
no wave or shiver mars the peace of walls.
The place is as unremarkable as glass, a fishbowl
revealing the flicker of every bright fin
but itself solid and motionless,
boring, and so easy to destroy.

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You're in the middle of your walk
and your fingers are skating
on the granite sides of buildings.
The gun reposes against your skin, only
inches from the heart, and as you touch them,
the things of the world will touch you back.
Wordless and huge, desire animates every
point in the stone city's air, as if
the strip of sidewalk beneath you
needed your step to go on being there.

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Mark Rudman

The Shoebox

I finally broke down and opened the shoebox
which arrived just weeks after my father died.
All winter I had put it out of sight on top

of the bookshelves where I wouldn't be tempted.
The box was not, as I would have expected,
stuffed with photographs, but packets,

wallet-sized, each with a dozen
"snaps," each sequence a kind of story,
and I couldn't have predicted how they would spring out

once I removed the rubber bands
wound tight as bowstrings around the top—
too late now to put them back,

to stop what I had set in motion—
there is no love in them, only
a memorializing will.

A predictable cast, my father's five
older sisters, their several (only three
between them!) issue.

It wasn't that everyone looked demented,
those spinster aunts, those whiz kid cousins,
but that no one looked like they wanted

to be where they were, in that parking lot fronting
the beach,
in front of that penny arcade or movie marquee,
clutching that bulging suitcase. . . .

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Only one glossy found its way into the box,
the only shot not taken with my father's *Minolta*:
a puppet without strings, no,

a ventriloquist's dummy, all shocked innocence—
me, glassy-eyed, open-mouthed, plenty of space
between my teeth, dangling above

my father, a rotund, baby-faced, leering man,
and his mother, a slack-jawed, toothless old woman,
greedily gazing up at the child as if she were
its mother . . . .

The passersby on Times Square look happy
in a miserable sort of way.
In the mid-fifties laissez-faire seems

to extend everywhere except the family.
I plucked the images I didn't like
but when, after a few hours,

I tried to stuff the slender packets back in
and close the box, even with half
of the photographs smoking in the wood stove

they wouldn't smash down, the rubber bands
would not stretch beyond the limit
they had held for a decade,

yet I felt if I was to sleep, to have peace,
the box had to be shut.
The top had to fit snug around the edges.

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Christopher Merrill

Words

Paint blistering on the ceiling of the den:
Excuses gathered speed, helping no one.
So I walked up the same mountain as before.

Passed the same barbed wire, broken glass, tire tracks.
Then vetch, and penstemon, and the rusted water
Pipe coursing down through stands of scrub oak, aspen.

In the dry creek: a rattlesnake, coiling,
Guarding the rocks, the ripped oak roots, head swaying,
Shaking its only bead, like a fanatic . . .

I know the little ones can kill: their venom's
Pure as the fury of the lovers' first
Attempts at cruelty, before they learn

What words or gestures will end an argument
Without destroying everything again—
And yet I stood there for a while, listening

To a woodpecker addling an aspen,
A mule deer thrashing in the underbrush,
And near the city thunder rumbling . . .

Some rattlers grow to be as long as humans.
This one I sidestepped in the end, and headed
Up the steep part of the trail, holding my tongue.

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April Bernard

Boyacá is the land of liberty

Take that hand away, the hand
washing like small warm stones along my neck

There's a donkey standing in the doorway,
capable of commentary but silent from droopy-eyed folly.
She's the one who scales the cliff, 300 feet up, calling
Help me, help me

"The clouds have all crashed on the moon"
Yes, and that which has broken, the stronger for it

The fishing boats wear fedoras, the vicuña wear fedoras,
tilting the whirl of shadow and ridiculous aching light
away from eyes crowded by mottling blues and greens,
defeated by these maddest things

"Better a moment with an angel"
though Jesus in a copper boat forbids the lake to
dampen his feet

These holy details flutter like eucalyptus on the hillside—
Warmed and confused, like a child,
bound and gagged, like a child, left on the hillside
where the stars are hissing and singing, the crisp thin
moon is singing . . .

And if you will not remove that hand, at least
call upon the waters to be still

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Relative to what, we might well ask, is this *libertád*
in a colossus wrenched from rock and metal,
a plaza spread open like a flat concrete flower promiscuous
to the sun and the rain and the dutiful patriots who
do not attend?

Do not be afraid. Oh no, not you too.
"Do not be afraid."

And calibrated by the elegance of talk, what ladder has
been scaled
to tip the last book into place on the shelf,
to say, with satisfaction, "Carlyle, I believe,"
thus making our friends take flight?

How the unschooled legions of the deal guffaw at
the spectacle
of us making the connections; they laugh themselves sick

And how the marching phalanx of the dying
continues trudging, stern and preposterous,
stunned by the necessity of taking the next step
and believing in the next hill.

There's a donkey standing in the doorway, all hesitation,
a block of yellow light across her face—

Again, the stones line up like angels on my neck.

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Rain

Steven Millhauser

One summer evening at about midnight a man wearing eyeglasses and a light-blue shirt made his way through the crowded lobby of a movie theater and stepped outside with a look of dismay. The marquee was hung with a crackling curtain of rain. Groups of animated women stood in the brightness of the marquee shelter, while now and then a husband or boyfriend hunched his shoulders and marched into the downpour to bring the car around. Two plump girls in tight white shorts and denim jackets stood bent together at the edge of the rain, reaching out their fingers, whispering, giggling into the backs of their hands, as if the storm were a wild and erotic joke—and all at once they pulled their jackets over their heads and ran off into the rain like two upright turtles. A sudden flash of lightning revealed black thunderclouds in a lavender sky.

Mr. Porter jingled the car keys in his pocket and looked down with a frown at his new black shoes. It was just his luck. He was wearing tan cotton pants, and the sleeves of his light-blue shirt were turned back neatly twice. With an irritable glance at his watch he walked to one end of the marquee shel-

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ter, where the dry pale sidewalk became dark hissing wet. He reached out a palm, but to his surprise he felt no rain. He placed the tips of his shoes on the line of wetness, and bending forward at the waist, stretched out his arm farther and farther until he rose on his toes. A shot rang out. Mr. Porter began to thrash the air with both arms as if he were teetering on the edge of a cliff.

As the thunder died away Mr. Porter regained his balance. He adjusted his eyeglasses, looked contemptuously at a grinning couple, and walked to a dark corner beside the ticket booth, where he stood with his back to a wall of glass-covered coming attractions. One showed a red-headed woman in a transparent green nightgown standing before an open door with her hands pressed to her cheeks and her mouth wide open. Mr. Porter folded his arms across his stomach. He leaned one shoulder against the ticket booth, crossed his legs so that one shoe balanced on its toe, and resolved to wait out the rain.

Soon the crowd had vanished but the rain remained. On the polished tar a traffic light threw rippling green and red reflections that mingled with the blinking lemon swirls of the marquee lights. The precise blue letters of a neon sign over a hardware store appeared in the street as an azure blur. Rain hissed on the street, drummed on cartops, made a sound like flung pebbles against a passing umbrella. It blew along the street in waves of mist. "Nice weather," said a voice. Mr. Porter started. Beside him stood a large woman who seemed to have sprung from one of the colorful coming attractions. Her rain-soaked orange hair was brown at the roots, her black eyebrows dripped down in wavy dark lines, the aquamarine of her eyelids flowed from the corners of her eyes. Rouge-colored drops rolled down her cheeks and dripped from her shining jaw. Mr. Porter nodded and glanced about. The marquee shelter was deserted except for a solitary figure in a tan trenchcoat who stood with his back to Mr. Porter and clasped in pink hands a tightly furled black umbrella with a silver point. "It's getting late," Mr. Porter said in a low voice barely above a whisper, and then he pushed against the ticket booth with his shoulder and straightened up and stepped briskly away, taking a deep

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breath and lowering his head as he approached the loud, dark cement.

As his foot swung over the line, Mr. Porter saw dark streaks soaking into his light pantleg. By the third step he felt as if he had stepped into a bathroom shower. Only a few pale streaks remained in his shirt, dyed dark blue by the rain. The backs of his hands glistened; his black watchband gleamed. His shoes shone with a perfect finish but he feared the black polish was being washed away by the rubbing rain. Water poured down the back of his neck and dripped from his nose and chin. His lenses rippled. A blurred taxi floated by, flinging at him a sheet of water.

When he reached his Chevy hatchback, Mr. Porter stepped from the curb into an ankle-deep stream of rushing water. He groped along the front of the car until he came to the door on the driver's side. At the sight of the closed window he exhaled sharply with relief, but as he reached for his keys he was surprised to see that the lock button was raised. He opened the door quickly and slid onto the suddenly illuminated seat, which vanished as he shut the door. In the dark he took off his glasses and rubbed them against his soaked shirt. When he put them on he saw wavy blurs. Drops from his hair streamed down his cheeks onto his lips. Fumbling in his pocket with wet, slippery fingers, Mr. Porter drew out the zippered leather case from which his car keys dangled. He inserted the ignition key. It did not fit. Mr. Porter opened the door and in the amber light examined the blurred silver shape. It appeared to be the correct key. As he turned to insert it again, he noticed on the clean black seat beside him a roll of butter-rum lifesavers, and suddenly he had the odd sensation that the world was unraveling, rushing out of control, as when, in his childhood, descending a dark stairway, he had reached out his foot for the last, phantom stair even as the floor, one step too soon, leaped up to meet him. Quickly Mr. Porter looked about. On the back seat he saw a lidless blue coffee can containing a screwdriver with a transparent yellow handle. Beside the can lay a little naked pink plastic doll the size of a thumb.

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"Stupid cars," Mr. Porter muttered, stepping out into the rain and slamming the door. A passing car swerved and honked. Under the bright blur of a solitary streetlight, four car-lengths away, stood another Chevy hatchback. Mr. Porter splashed toward it and bent down over the rear bumper. In the dripping chrome he saw his image, a colored ripple, and through his streaming lenses he read his license plate. Mr. Porter made his way to the door on the driver's side. The window was half open, though the door was locked. When he opened the door a pool of rainwater on the driver's seat reflected the amber light. On the glistening seat beside it lay a fat wet paperback with blue page-ends. Its shiny, sticky-looking cover stuck up, revealing watery blue stains on the uppermost page. On the back seat lay a slim black umbrella.

Mr. Porter drove slowly, leaning over the wheel and squinting through the rainsheeted windshield at the rainbowed tar. From time to time he rubbed the misty glass with a quick motion of his left hand; his fingers left faint oily patterns on the glass. Through the dripping arches designed by the wipers he watched the stoplights and shopfronts flowing along the street in iridescent streams. Slowly, wavering silently, the bright signs and windows floated past, dripping into the street, streaming along the gutters, pouring into drains: a luminous green window filled with green-tinted bicycles, a blue-glowing cardboard girl holding up a bottle of beer, a red and green pizzeria. Under a streetlamp a brilliant red stopsign glistened at the end of its stick like an enormous lollipop. Mr. Porter turned onto another street. A stone divider appeared, the stores and bars and rainbows were replaced by large ghostly houses flanked by shadowy trees, beyond the double arch of the wipers the black windshield was dotted with transparent crystal drops. A blinking stoplight flung a handful of rubies across the windshield. In the distance Mr. Porter saw the tall misty pillars of the thruway, and soon he was rising slowly into the air along a sleek entrance ramp.

He could barely see. Blurred rows of aquamarine lights stretched curving into the distance, tinting the mist. Mr. Porter felt as if he were driving at the bottom of a green swimming

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pool. He stayed to the right, straining through rippling lenses for the broken white line that marked the lane. A passing truck sprayed water against the windshield and for a moment Mr. Porter could see nothing but the lazy wipers, bowing left and right, left and right, like twin actors on a stage. The applause has died down, the audience is making its way to the exits, but still they bow, left and right, left and right, though the audience has left long ago and the lights are out in the deserted theater. A white streak appeared; Mr. Porter was driving in the center of two lanes. Behind him a truck was flashing its lights. Mr. Porter swerved to the right. The truck rushed past, throwing water at the side window like a fistful of sand. In the distance he saw a red glow from the shopping center. The melting exit signs announced his town.

Mr. Porter turned off at his exit and drove slowly down to an orange streetlight that spilled over its glass container into the surrounding air and dripped onto the flowing windshield. The rain was falling harder. It hammered against the cartop like sharp fingernails drumming against a metal table. Who will come? No one comes, no one will ever come, though the fingernails drum drum drum against the metal table. All at once Mr. Porter remembered that he was wet, and the memory was like stepping into the rain; the drumming rain seemed to be pouring through the roof and driving his clothes against his skin. Soon he would be home. He would lie warm and dry in his bed like a freshly ironed shirt in a drawer. Looking carefully both ways, Mr. Porter turned left and passed under the dripping highway. In the near distance appeared the familiar railroad trestle. Above it the black sky glowed murky red from the shopping center across Main Street. As Mr. Porter passed under the trestle the car sank into water above its wheels, and stopped.

He waited, stepped on the gas, and waited longer; stepped on the gas, waited, stepped on the gas; waited; stepped on the gas. As he waited he noticed water seeping through the doors onto the floor. Quickly he tried again. The water was rising slowly. Mr. Porter opened the door and stepped out.

He stood up to his knees in water. And for a moment he

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felt like lying down in the water and closing his eyes, he imagined his body at peace, drifting away in the dark water. Mr. Porter began to pull his legs forward in the direction of the shopping center. He was more than two miles from home. A sudden downpour fell on him—he had forgotten the momentary shelter of the trestle. Through the heavy drops he passed slowly up the incline to the stoplight at Main Street. Across the street the long smear of the shopping center loomed above a deserted parking lot. The vast orange-red letters of the supermarket and the cherry-red letters of the bargain store stained the dark mist overhead and flowed in the gleaming tar. In a far corner of the parking lot stood a glass telephone booth that reminded him of an aquarium and a coffin. The light changed, and as Mr. Porter walked across the street he heard sucking and oozing sounds in his ruined shoes.

As he stepped onto the parking lot he saw his shoe disappear into a red puddle; when he lifted it he saw the polish dripping away in redblack drops. The rain was coming in sharp slanting lines, driving against his cheeks, his shirt, his shoes. Mr. Porter glanced at his watch. Through the dripping crystal he saw two wavy hands. A faint black smudge was visible on his pale wrist beside the shining black band. Mr. Porter rubbed the band with a fingertip; his finger showed a black stain. Through streaming eyeglasses he peered up at the distant telephone booth. He imagined the telephone ringing in his empty house. The parking lot was streaked with luminous bands of cherry-red and orange-red, and Mr. Porter saw red ripples in his shoes, a reddish glow in his flashing hands. His cat would prick up her ears before slowly settling her chin on her outstretched paws. Mr. Porter tried to walk quickly but he seemed to be walking through a tide. He would never arrive anywhere. His shoes were ruined, his shirt was ruined, everything was washing away. The rain was flooding him, passing through him and coming out the other side. Everything was coming undone. Black drops fell from his watchband onto his hands, blue drops fell from his shirtsleeves onto his arms. Have I wasted my life? The telephone booth was far, far away.

Mr. Porter stopped. He was standing alone under a dripping

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redblack sky. Behind him the railway trestle had melted away, nothing remained of the highway but a distant shimmer. His shirt was running down in blue streams onto his pants, his pants were trickling onto his shoes, his shoes were flowing away in inky streams. Everything was washing away. His cheeks were running, his eyeglasses were spilling down in bright crystal drops, flesh-colored streams fell from his shining fingertips, he was dissolving in the rain. In ripples of blue and flesh and tan and black he flowed into the shine of the tar. For a moment on an empty parking lot a bright puddle gleamed, but then the rain washed it away.

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

FICTION

Charles Baxter is the author of two collections of stories, *Harmony of the World* (University of Missouri Press) and *Through the Safety Net* (Viking), as well as the novel *First Light* (Viking, 1988). *Imaginary Paintings*, a book of poems, is forthcoming from Paris Review Editions. He teaches at Wayne State University in Detroit, and is currently at work on a second novel.

Susan Chace has been a staff reporter for *Forbes* and *The Wall Street Journal*. She lives with her family in New York. "Stickup" is excerpted from *Intimacy*, her first novel, to be published by Random House in 1989.

Janet Kauffman is the author of a short story collection, *Places in the World a Woman Could Walk* (Knopf), and a novel, *Collaborators* (Knopf). She lives in Hudson, Michigan.

Steven Millhauser is the author of *Edwin Mullhouse* (Knopf) and *In the Penny Arcade* (Knopf). He teaches part-time at Skidmore College.

POETRY

Claribel Alegria was born in Nicaragua, and grew up in El Salvador. In 1978 her book of poems, *Sobrevivo*, won the Casa de Las Americas Prize of Cuba. These poems, translated by the author and her husband, **Darwin J. Flakoll,** are from her forthcoming volume to be published in January by the University of Pittsburgh Press.

April Bernard's first book of poems, *Blackbird Bye Bye*, which won the 1988 Walt Whitman Prize from the Academy of American Poets, will be published in the spring of 1989 by Random House.

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Henri Cole is the author of *The Marble Queen* (Atheneum, 1986). He lives in New York City.

Alice Fulton's second book, *Palladium* (University of Illinois, 1986), was a winner of the National Poetry Series, and is now in its third printing. A Guggenheim Fellow in 1987–1988, she recently traveled to the People's Republic of China as one of a delegation of eight American writers chosen to meet with Chinese writers. She teaches at the University of Michigan.

Brooks Haxton's forthcoming collection of poems, *Traveling Company*, will close with a series of pagan hours. "Compline" is one poem from that group; others will appear in *Missouri Review* and *New England Review*. He teaches at Sarah Lawrence College and lives nearby with his wife and son.

Martha Hollander's work has appeared recently in *Shenandoah* and *The Quarterly*.

Primo Levi's books include *Survival in Auschwitz, Moments of Reprieve,* and *The Drowned and the Saved*. His *Collected Poems* will be published in January by Faber & Faber. Levi died in 1987. His translators are **Brian Swann**, a professor at Cooper Union and the author of five books of poetry, and **Ruth Feldman**, whose latest collection of poetry is *To Whom it May Concern*.

James McMichael's collections of poems are *Against the Falling Evil*, *The Lover's Familiar*, and *Four Good Things*. He has recently completed a book called *Stephen, Jamesy, James Joyce* and is now at work on a book-length sequence of poems. He teaches in the writing program at the University of California, Irvine.

Christopher Merrill's poetry has appeared in the *Antioch Review*, *New Virginia Review*, and *Denver Quarterly*, among others. He is the current director of the Santa Fe Writers Conference.

Geoffrey O'Brien is the author of *Dream Time: Chapters from the Sixties* (Viking, 1988) and *Hardboiled America* (Van Nostrand Reinhold), and contributes critical writing to the *Village Voice* and *The New York Review of Books*. A collection of poems, *A Book of Maps*, will be published by Red Dust in 1989.

Dennis O'Driscoll was born in County Tipperary, Ireland, in 1954. He has published two collections of poetry, *Kist* (Dolmen Press, 1982) and *Hidden Extras* (Anvil Press, 1987). He has edited *Poetry Ireland Review*, and is a regular reviewer for British and Irish periodicals.

Sharon Olds received the National Book Critics Circle Award for her collection of poetry entitled *The Dead and the Living*. Her third book of poems, *The Gold Cell*, was published by Knopf in 1987. She teaches at New York University and at the Goldwater Hospital on Roosevelt Island, and is completing work on a new manuscript, entitled *The Father*.

Mark Rudman's book of poems, *By Contraries and Other Poems*, was published by the National Poetry Foundation. He is also the author of *Robert Lowell: An Introduction to the Poetry*. He is the editor of *Pequod* magazine.

Jean Zimmerman received a graduate writing degree from Columbia University. She lives in New York City.

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FEATURE

Shusha Guppy is the London Editor of *The Paris Review*, and a regular contributor to the *Daily Telegraph*, British *Vogue*, and other periodicals. *The Blindfold Horse*, an autobiographical work, will be published by Beacon Press in 1989.

INTERVIEWS

Jordan Elgrably is a Paris-based writer. His interview with Milan Kundera appeared in the winter issue of *Salmagundi* and he is currently preparing a volume of his conversations with major novelists. His recently-completed novel is *Atlas, A Mythistorema.*

J. D. McClatchy recently edited *Poets On Painters: Essays on the Art of Painting by Twentieth Century Poets* (University of California Press, 1988). A collection of his essays, entitled *White Papers*, will be published next year by Columbia University Press. He is a Guggenheim Fellow and is presently completing his third book of poems.

ART

Lucas Samaras was born in Macedonia, Greece, in 1936, and lives in New York. Recent exhibitions of his work have been held at the Denver Art Museum, National Museum of American Art, Washington, D.C., High Museum of Art, Atlanta, and The Pace Gallery, New York.

Cindy Sherman was born in Glen Ridge, New Jersey, in 1954, and lives in New York. Her photographs have been exhibited internationally, including a recent show at Metro Pictures, New York.

Philip Taaffe was born in Elizabeth, New Jersey, in 1955, and lives in New York. Paintings and drawings have been exhibited recently at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, and Pat Hearn Gallery, New York.

Addendum

In his contributor's note to issue 106 of *The Paris Review*, Christopher Logue neglected to acknowledge that Walon Green is the first author of the screenplay *Crusoe*.

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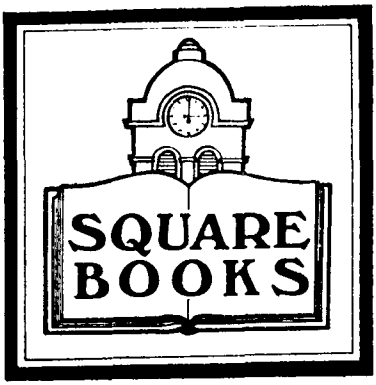

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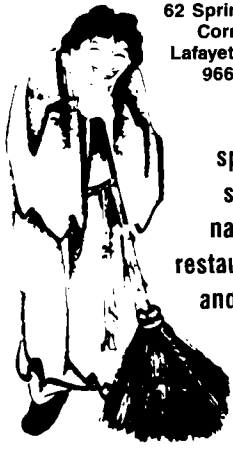

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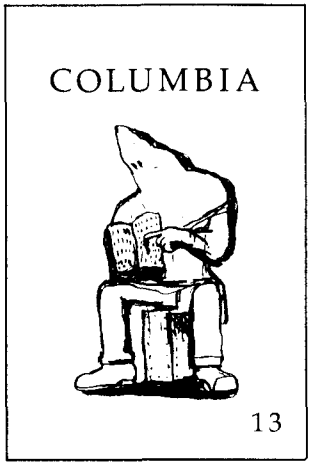

Contributors have included: Jorge Luis Borges, Joseph Brodsky, Italo Calvino, Raymond Carver, Nadine Gordimer, Stanley Kunitz, Czeslaw Milosz, Lorrie Moore, Sharon Olds, Grace Paley, Marge Piercy, Gilbert Sorrentino, Derek Walcott, and others.

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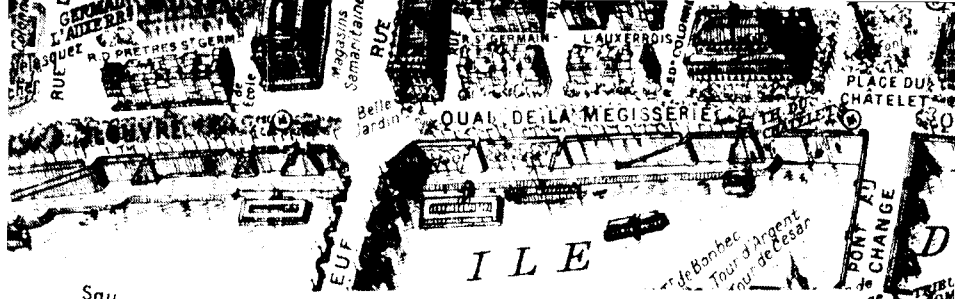

It was a Thursday when I lifted the phone and called my agent. I said, "Gabe, I'm going to be sixty-six tomorrow, Friday, January 13, 1978, and I've been writing fiction all my life and no one's ever published a word of it and I'd give my left pinkie to get into *The Paris Review*." And I did because Gabriel was interested at once and told me that he'd get in touch with me the next day because he thought he might find a buyer. He did. . . . When my story came out, I went to Dr. Dodypol and had the finger removed surgically and under anesthesia. His head nurse, Kate Crackernuts, wrapped the finger in cotton bandages and in red tissue paper with a yellow ribbon around it and I walked out a published author and weighing three ounces less than when I walked in.

—Dallas Wiebe, "Night Flight to Stockholm," Issue 73

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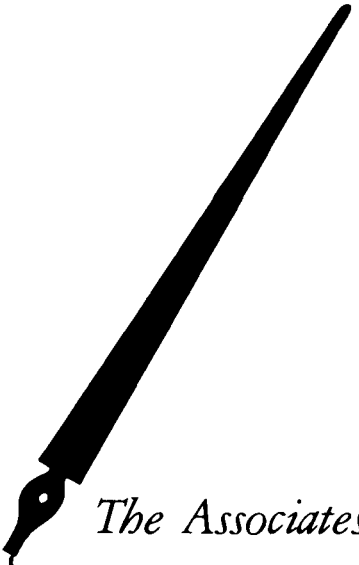

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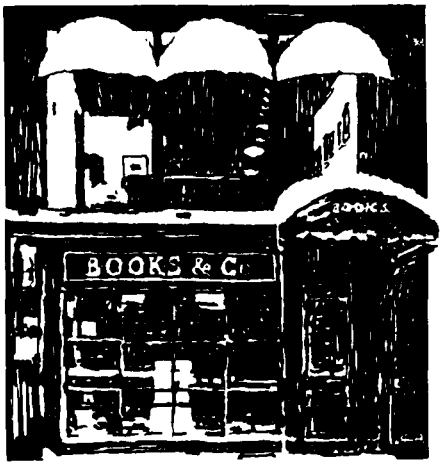

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